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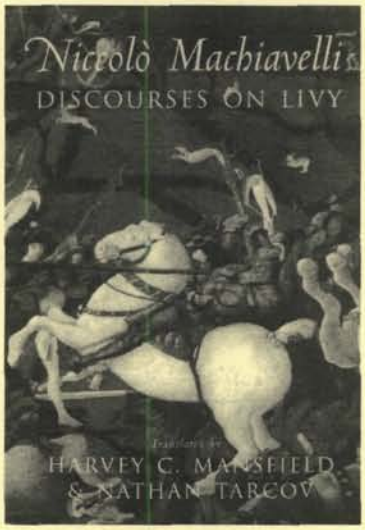


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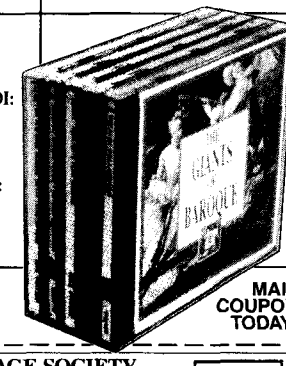


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# Ticked to the Min

ARISTIDES

Ticked to the max, kids say, or at least used to say, a nice shorthand phrase meaning mad as hell, angry to the highest power, gorge risen to its utmost height. I haven't myself been ticked to the max in many years—I mean really ticked, plate-throwing, fist-through-the window, strangle-the-bulldog ticked. A single observation has helped to keep my anger down. It is that one must never be enraged when people one takes for creeps act like creeps. In these, my sunset—make that my dusk—years, I have become a calm, gentle fellow, a relative pussycat, almost comatose. Save the ticking, hold the max.

What I do find, however, is that I am more and more ticked to the min. Small things irritate me: lots of them. Minor events bug me. The other night, at Orchestra Hall in Chicago, I was greatly enjoying myself while listening to an attractive, mostly youthful group called the Brandenburg Ensemble. It was playing one of the Brandenburg concerti with great vivacity, when I noticed that the first violinist and leader of the group, a youngish man named Todd Phillips, was wearing, along with his tuxedo, red and green argyle socks. Why would he do that? Why did it distract me so much that his socks were not black? I spent the better part of the second half of the program contemplating those argyles. I was, I think it fair to say, ticked to the min.

Someone mentions that she has had a "fun time" at a party, and this use of the word *fun* as an adjective ticks me to the min. A fun person, a fun couple, a fun place—I want nothing to do with any of them. Years ago an English acquaintance, the late Vernon Young, asked me, in perfect deadpan, what I thought Americans meant when they instructed one, on parting, to "have fun." I have put that phrase in quotation marks, but the typographic support needed to make plain Vernon Young's dripping contempt doesn't exist, except perhaps in smoking red neon. I suppose there must also be fun cities, fun states, fun countries—who knows, fun continents or even fun funerals. Don't get me wrong. I do not wish to stand in the way of anyone having a "fun time"; I just don't want them around me.

For a couple of decades now, I have been a bit nutty on the subject of language. Every five or so years, another word sets off my perhaps too hair-triggered tickeroo. Frequent use of the word *impact* used to get to me. Then the ardor for *impact* cooled and *process* was the hot word; people seemed to feel that every damn thing in life was a bloody process. I guess the word made its users feel they were deep thinkers. *Intriguing* in place of *interesting* or even *fascinating* followed; *intriguing* should go right back into the worlds of spying and diplomacy where it belongs.

Now the word that registers on my tickometer is *focus.* A metaphor from the world of cameras, microscopes, and telescopes, it must be the most endemic—and silly—word of our day. People are invoked to "stay focused." Athletic teams that lose their focus are in serious trouble. Every student paper, no matter how diffuse, begins by talking about its focus. Tin-eared academics even go in for the odious *foci,* and may they find joy in it. Let's get back to such perfectly sound words as *concentrate* and *emphasize.* I'm ticked, I tell you, ticked to the min.

I also have a strong aversion toward all botanical metaphors. I don't like the notion of people "growing"; I don't much fancy "nurturing" anybody. "Fermenting," too, is not my



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idea of a good time, and put a hold on "replanting." All this botanizing of human experience is a lot of fertilizer, in my view. But, then, I may be alone in this; for the majority of people it may make no "differential," as the sports announcers are wont to say.

I see myself making quotation marks with my fingers around the word *differential.* I see myself doing this in a nightmare, of course. If I were ever to use what I think of as "finger quotes," I hope some decent citizen will grab my fingers and bend them back, fiercely. Once a sad, old device of academic lecturers, finger quotes have come to be used by nonacademics, too. When I've noted their use, I've wanted to ask whether the person using them also does ellipses. "Have you," I want to add, "a sign to denote irony—a nice little back flip perhaps?" Ticks me, baby, knock it off.

Ticks me perhaps as much as what I have come to think of as dumbing-down footnotes. "Dandiacal means 'inclined to be a dandy,'" reads a footnote on page 26 of *John Betjeman Letters.* "No kidding," I answer, in my happy habit of talking back to print. And in the Penguin edition of Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes,* the editor, helpful fellow, tells me who Jean-Jacques Rousseau was and explains that a samovar is a "copper urn for boiling water and keeping tea hot." Penguin's edition of Henry James's *The Europeans* informs me who George Washington was. (Thanks, Dude.) A recent reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* referred to a book "so meticulously annotated as to be fully comprehensible to readers unfamiliar with western civilization." A good deal of this, apparently, is going around.

This dumbing down ticks me off, but not quite so much as historical bloopers in movies. By this I mean the increasing use in period movies of words and phrases that had not yet historically come into being. In Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway,* a movie set in the 1920s, the following phrases are found in the dialogue: "conflicted," "a real page-turner," "I try to factor it into my work," "the difficulty of relating," and "she's so charismatic." What ticks me off here is the inability, or unwillingness, to get small things right—especially at those prices. But, then, perhaps I ought to be grateful that God, after Moses thanked him for parting the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments,* didn't answer, "Hey, no problem."

I go to the movies less and less and have become chiefly a VCR man. My taste in movies is broad; I tend to be of the view that a bad movie isn't going to destroy my virtue, though I do prefer a bad movie to cost only three dollars instead of fifteen dollars, as it does for two at a movie theater. The inexpensiveness of movies on videotape has probably lowered my own taste, making me tolerant of less-than-respectable movies. But I still find it difficult to take heavy sex scenes, especially what I think of as slow-motion sex scenes. When I am watching with someone else in the room, I don't quite know where to put my eyes—I am embarrassed to the point of being mildly, minimally, but still genuinely, ticked. Am I being prudish here, or am I only offering in myself an illustration of the La Rochefoucauld maxim: "We do not so much desert our appetites as they desert us"?

I've never had an appetite for violence, at least not one that went beyond slapstick comedy. I cannot abide much in the way of bloodiness in movies or television shows. I watch no hospital dramas, lest my dreams be interrupted by the specter of blood-drenched rubber gloves. The ghastliness of the local news has caused me to cease watching it. All those body bags, photographs of battered wives and children, interviews with relatives of the freshly murdered—just who is it that requires a continuous flow of such monstrous information?

I don't really know, but, like the old Persian kings greeted by bad news, I say let's put out the messenger's eyes. Or, in the case of all these television Johnnies and Janes, I say let's put out their hairdos. My tolerance for television newsmen and newswomen is exceedingly low. My notion of hell would be to have to eat all my meals with the on-camera cast of *60 Minutes.* ("Please pass the beets, Andy.") Something about the gathering of news diminishes a human being, leaves him without dignity, and doing it on a daily basis, in front of a television camera, can make him positively detestable. I dislike the people who do it even more when they engage in the false banter known, I believe, as "happy talk," in which they attempt to give their best but never quite persuasive impression of human beings.

I find I quickly grow tired of celebrities, or those people whom the media tend to vaunt, highlight, attack, or otherwise italicize. Increasingly, the media like to turn their atten-



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tion to their own, which adds a note of piquant self-aggrandizement to the whole affair. My fatigue with celebrities, I note, doesn't take long to turn into general impatience, which elides into disapproval, a form of free-floating ticked-off-edness. I wish to hear no more, for example, about the comedian David Letterman, a man I once thought amusing; the same goes for his mother. I have heard enough about Emma Thompson to hold me for a good spell. The journalist Michael Kinsley, who has been getting much publicity of late in connection with his editing a magazine on the Internet, is also ready for the hook. My own celebrity, it seems to me, is just about right: I am, much to my surprise, mildly famous and quite thankful that almost nobody knows about it.

I still find myself a little ticked when I watch people go gaga over those ultimate American celebrities, the Swiss Family Kennedy, our very own substitute for a royal family. None of this has much to do with politics, for I can think of good reasons for not thinking much of Jack and Bobby Kennedy from either the left- or right-wing perspective. No, what I think ticks me is the inability of people to see through such thin pretensions as the Kennedy family provides to being great or even greatly stylish to the sadness, squalor, and, in the case of Joseph Kennedy, the so-called Founding Father, the deep corruption and downright meanness that lie behind it all. Put an ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: A better royal family wanted. The current one ticks me.

Almost all forms of telemarketing tick me off—and some of them register slightly beyond the min on my tickometer. I don't like to get these calls during the day, I don't like to get them at night, and I especially don't like to get them while at dinner, when most of them seem to arrive. Of late I have been getting early morning calls from brokerage firms, from guys with New York accents and very knowing voices wanting to put me on to a good thing. I find I don't in the least mind telling these rebarbative types to kiss off. I feel rather differently about women trying to get me to take a JCPenney or Sears credit card; they, clearly, are trying to make a few extra bucks to keep things afloat. (In my twenties and briefly out of work, I once tried to sell newspaper subscriptions over the telephone. I lasted two nights and never went back to pick up my check for eleven dollars.)

Yet my tolerance is short-circuited if the telemarketers address me by my first name. I take it that more and more of them have been trained to do so. Why it is thought good salesmanship I cannot say, for what person wishes to be called by his or her first name by a stranger likely never to be encountered again? I even read a mild contempt into this first-name business, comparable to the old habit of calling men Mac, Ace, Chief, or Buddy, or calling women Honey, Sweetie, or Doll.

If the person on the other end of the line sounds especially young, I will sometimes say that I am in my early nineties and that I wonder, given my elderliness, if perhaps I ought not to be addressed as Mr. Aristides. On a few occasions, I have lectured people who have addressed me over the phone by my first name. Invariably, doing so has been a mistake, because the caller had something useful to offer: a job for a former student, kind words about something I have written, a message from a common friend. I have ceased to lecture.

Still, all this phony informality is, I suppose, part of a tendency toward the informalization of public life generally. In fully half the restaurants I frequent, the waiters tell me their first names, and some of them tell me that they have already tasted the food I have just ordered. Such informality goes along with the gradual elimination of neckties and jackets, dresses and heels from the regular wardrobes of adults, or what used to be called—quaint term as it now seems—grown-ups. Perhaps it is my own tendency, once I discover the way the wind is blowing, to turn around and march directly into it, but I have come to appreciate formality more and more.

As a sometime university teacher, I have always addressed my students, at least in class, as Mr. Newton or Miss Quinn. If I get to know the student better, I may use his or her first name outside of class, but I never allow students to address me by my first name. I am pleased to report that it has never occurred to any of them to do so, which leads me to believe that I am giving off the correct fumes of formality.

When I began teaching, twenty or so years ago, I wasn't sure how I would deal with the great first-name or last-name question. I remember calling the roll on the first day in a freshman class and coming to the name—last



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name first, on the enrollment sheet—Pipal, Faustin. In response to my calling it out, a redheaded kid with a winningly open face asked, "Excuse me sir, but would you mind calling me Frosty?" It took me only a nanosecond to realize that I would not be able to address standard pompous academic questions to someone named Frosty, as in: "What, precisely, did Nietzsche mean when he said, now that God is dead, man is left to confront the abyss, *Frosty*?" I have as a teacher used last names ever since. When I recounted this to a young man working in the office of a literary agent, he replied that he would have loved being called by his last name by a teacher, but it had not happened once in his four years at Princeton. Learning about this, Christian Gauss, I dare say, would have been ticked to more than the min.

Part of the problem is that naming has itself become comic. I recently read an article about the basketball player Rick Barry and learned that one of his children is named Canyon Shane Barry. The splendid outfielder Andre Dawson has a daughter named Diamond Nicole Dawson. This naming of children after geological phenomena could get out of hand. If Canyon, why not Ravine? If Diamond, why not Zircon? If geological names, why not culinary ones? How easy it is to imagine a girl named Marinade, a boy called Au Jus. In Nora Ephron's novel *Heartburn*, one of the characters is said to have gone out with the first Jewish Kimberly. I have heard about a girl named Page Goldstein. I am sure that there must by now be Jewish girls named Kelly. Poor children, victims of their parents' rather sad yearning for distinctiveness and elegance, they shall have to drag these pretentious names around all their days.

Like Billy Wilder, who said, "I have always had more fear of pretentiousness than of failure," I fear pretentiousness in myself and mock it, to myself, in others. It doesn't exactly tick me off, even to the min; I suppose it gives me the droops. Mention of the droops—a neologism of my own devising—reminds me that more language is needed to register these gradations and calibrations of negative feeling. Only the other day I learned a new word in this line, *chuffed*, which apparently means to be irritated, disgruntled, more than a little displeased. I suppose it falls betwixt ticked to the min and ticked to the max; after the latter, comes furious, outraged, enraged, inflamed, and completely out-of-control, full-hemorrhage-ahead apoplectic.

*"Du calme. Du calme,"* the examining physician in Brussels tell Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, his best advice for surviving in the tropics. Not such bad advice for urban living, either. I go along thinking that my own temper is fairly well under control, then—ping!—out of the box it pops. It seems under better control when I am on foot than when I am behind the wheel of my car. Seated in my car, I tend to forget that I am a smallish man and, consequently, incapable of impressive physical violence.

The other day, taking a shortcut, I drove down an alley near my apartment and was stopped by a parked car with an older—older than I—man in it who had one of those red faces that suggests high blood pressure and possibly ulcers. When I asked him if he would please move his car just slightly to allow me to pass, he told me that he wasn't about to move his car, that I could forget about it, and that I could back my car nearly a full city block out of the alley. It turned out that I was able to squeeze through, barely, but while doing so—ping!—I heard myself calling this man a disagreeable old fornicator. Fortunately for me, he wasn't ready for a fight. A fine spectacle the two of us would have made, there in the alley, struggling on the ground to some sort of ignominious draw. I see torn trousers, broken glasses, possibly a chipped tooth or two, lawyers to follow. *Du calme. Du calme.*

I have never thought of myself as having a strong temper, but, as Conrad also says (in *Lord Jim*), "No man quite understands his own artful dodges from the grim shadow of self-knowledge." I go whole fiscal quarters without losing my temper, though now that I write it out, *losing* strikes me as almost precisely the wrong word. What happens is that my temper "finds" me. It usually finds me when I am frustrated or when I think someone has acted unreasonably—unreasonably, that is, to me. Then, there he is, my temper, crude fellow, blatant and coarse, full of profanity, hyperbole, rarely witty, certain to say the wrong thing, always going too far.

Once it was thought that it was good mental hygiene to tell people off regularly. Get it off your chest, don't keep it all locked up inside—repression is the enemy. I have known



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men who worked together who could tell each other off brutally—gloves off, no holds barred, to mix a boxing and a wrestling metaphor—then go off to lunch together laughing. Not me. I can neither tell anyone off nor bear to be told off (and I never have been, except in print on various occasions, where the humiliation may be greater but at least the embarrassment is less).

I suppose there are advantages to having a hot temper. People tread carefully around you. The hot-tempered and the deeply neurotic, I have discovered, often tend to get their own way. Disputing with them, most people feel, usually just isn't worth it. My temper has never done me any good in this line. The preferred position to be in, I should think, is to have people say about you, "He's very nice, but don't cross him." I fear that people can more accurately say about me, "He's not all that nice, but, not to worry, you can cross him all you like."

Temper comes out of the word *temperament*, and when I consider the old division of temperament into four types—sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholic—I conclude that the second and fourth, in a combination favoring the fourth, apply to me. No one, at any rate, has accused me of being either sanguine or phlegmatic. Melancholy seems to me a sensible mood with which to regard the world. Was it F. Scott Fitzgerald who said that depression is the natural state of an intelligent man in middle age? If so, he was right to say it, not least because, dying at the age of forty-four, he himself never got beyond early middle age.

Fitzgerald had his own list of things that ticked him to the min—and well beyond. In "The Crack-Up," an essay of 1936, he listed the things he could and couldn't stand. "I couldn't stand the sight of Celts, English, Politicians, Strangers, Virginians, Negroes (light or dark), Hunting People, or retail clerks, and middlemen in general, all writers . . . and all the classes as classes and most of them as members of their class." On the cheerier side: "I liked doctors and girl children up to the age of about thirteen and well-brought-up boy children about eight years old on. . . . I forgot to add that I liked old men. . . . I liked Katharine Hepburn's face on the screen, no matter what was said about her pretentiousness, and Miriam Hopkins' face, and old friends if I only saw them once a year and could remember their ghosts."

Fitzgerald claimed to be describing a crack-up, his own, but, though I have a much nuttier list of antipathies, I am still claiming mental health. For example, I find I don't like the new abbreviations for states, and I refuse to write IN or OR or ME or MI or IL or IA. Never friendly toward zip codes to begin with, I really dislike the four numbers that now come after zip codes in many addresses. (These additional four numbers must have a name, but I'd rather not learn it.) I also dislike lengthy addresses generally, and I will put off writing a letter to anyone who has an address that runs to more than five lines (unless, as in England, one of the lines is the name of the house). My antipathies are not strictly separable from my snobberies, but I can live with that.

Clearly, I much prefer my snobberies to other people's. Clothes or luggage with designer labels or the designer's name writ large on them tick me lightly to the min. When I see Ralph Lauren's minuscule polo player on a man's shirt, or M. Louis Vuitton's intertwined monograph on a woman's handbag, or the small Hermes insignia on a necktie, I tend to think rather less of its wearer or carrier. They are willing to pay too much money for a little false prestige, and so, not to put too fine a word on it, they are chumps. They lose status in my eyes.

I am not ignorant of the lure of brand names, for as a boy tennis player I wore only Fred Perry shorts, Rene Lacoste shirts, Jack Purcell shoes, and I am not altogether above them now, but a little understatement is called for. Instead, overstatement grows, and designers' names—Gucci, Yves Saint-Laurent, DKNY, the all too effable Calvin Klein—dominate the front of sweatshirts, T-shirts, and underwear. Can it be long before some savvy surgeon gets to one of these designers and begins a line of designer surgery? I imagine that little man with his polo mallet aloft just above a fresh appendix scar, or perhaps an Armani quintuple bypass with the most careful double stitching and a slight break just above the aorta.

I remain half-tickled, half-ticked by too cutely named shops and firms. I not long ago saw an advertisement for Net to You, an operation that sets up one's computer and teaches one how to negotiate the Internet.



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Surely there will soon be competition from a firm called Charlotte's Place, which teaches one how to negotiate the World Wide Web. On the North Shore in Chicago, there is a glove and (I assume) women's accessory shop that calls itself Glove Me Tender. I have always wanted to buy the commercial space next door to it and open a men's scarf store and call it Kick Me in the Ascot. Perhaps it is best that I do not have unlimited funds.

Do other people get mildly worked up by such things? I rather hope that they do, but I have no way of knowing. Perhaps researchers at Pennsylvania State University have done a study on being ticked to the min. If they have, it will of course be contradicted by a study on the same subject done by researchers at Stanford University. "Studies," so-called, ought by now to tick us all to the min—no, more than that, they ought to leave most of us soundly chuffed, especially studies on foods that cause cancer and heart disease. These have been bounding back and forth for years, keeping us all nicely nervous about nearly everything we take into our bodies, including the air.

We have all been receiving a good beating on this front, being told what we cannot eat now, what we shouldn't have been eating years ago, what we probably shan't be allowed to eat in the future. I am glad to have been born in a gastronomically prelapsarian time, for I was able to spend a few decades eating exactly as I wished, before so many snakes (in the form of these blasted studies) were let loose in Eden. I find myself bugged, sometimes more than mildly, at not being able to eat, in decent quantity and with a clear conscience, things that I crave. Ticked again, naturally.

In the realm of ticked to the min, I mustn't neglect all the fine evidence of our going to hell in a handbasket, which, as you may have noticed, we really are. Take, for instance, the phrase "You're welcome." People are now in the world, I believe, who are entirely ignorant of this expression—and of the concept behind it. As a big thank-you man out of the middlewest, I find myself handing out lots of thank-yous for services rendered—to supermarket baggers, store clerks, garage attendants—and getting nothing back in return. Not infrequently I have an exchange at a drugstore or bakery where the clerk deliberately, it seems, chooses not to look at me, as if to insure that no human contact is being made. Will there be more and more of this in the world in the years ahead? "If this is really so," as the Liverpool magistrate said upon learning that oral sex was widely practiced in England, "I'm glad I do not have long to live."

The inability to get the small but necessary things right, though becoming commonplace, nonetheless does not lose its power to tick to the min. The sad lapses in grammar, especially on the part of people who are paid for their putative skill at language—writers, journalists, clergymen, psychologists—is part of it. So is the vast number of typographical errors, not least those that show up in my own books and articles. I have a reader who, in a monotone voice, occasionally telephones to report that he has found another typographical error in one of my books. I believe he thinks he is doing me a good turn—maybe he is naïve enough to think that publishers, in new editions, take care to correct such errors. ("My rare books," said the English minor writer Reggie Turner, "are the second editions.") Meanwhile, his calls are the equivalent of being told that, at the prom forty years ago, you may not have noticed but you had ketchup on your shirt, and that, oh yes, at your wedding, you had this odd bit of spinach between your front teeth. With a downcast heart, I thank this fellow for pointing out these typos. But before I hang up the phone, I find myself wanting to say, "Write if you find work."

Ralph Waldo Emerson ticks me to the min, and sometimes just a little beyond. With the exception of his book *English Traits* and portions of his journals, I find I cannot read the old boy. Although the title of his oration "The American Scholar" became the title of the magazine you are now reading, I find Emerson a great gasbag and a highly contradictious one: if he has said something with which you disagree in one place, he is sure to have said the reverse someplace else. With his abiding humorlessness, his oracular prose, his galloping garrulity, he has given the essay a bad name, making it seem no more than a sermon with drool added. What must Europeans who read him think of America! What must American schoolchildren who read him think of literature! He was the original talk-show host, with no guests other than himself.

Perhaps it is Emerson's opinionatedness that gets to me. His confidence about matters



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in the flux of controversy is preposterous. He is the father of all American pundits. Punditry no longer works for me. I recently read the introduction to a book of essays by a woman pundit, who went to great lengths to assure her readers that she continued to regard herself as solidly liberal, though she was against certain kinds of left-wing nonsense. As the sentences spun by—"I think. . . ." "I never said. . . ." "I never intended. . . ."—I found myself saying, "Madame, why do you suppose anybody gives a rat's rump? How do you come to think that your opinion is so very important? We have a deep problem here, and, if you want my opinion (since you have no hesitation about giving me yours), I'd say it stems from too much love in the home. Less confidence, more shyness is needed."

"She had a great many opinions," V. S. Naipaul notes of a character he thoroughly despises in his novel *Guerrillas*, "but taken together they did not add up to a point of view." I, too, have a great many opinions, and I now have to ask if they add up to a point of view. All these items that I claim tick me to the min would once have been called "pet peeves." I wonder if they aren't called "pet" because people who have them quite enjoy stroking them. One comes to depend on them. After a time, they give comfort, though there's always the danger that one becomes the sum of one's crotchets.

Growing up in Chicago, I remember men who used to love to start the day with Colonel Robert McCormick's *Chicago Tribune*, whose strongly isolationist, right-wing views would get them so worked up that it raised their blood pressure and provided them with body warmth in the winter months. My father was among them. So strong was his detestation of the old *Tribune* that, one day during a snow storm, when he had a flat tire and the driver of a *Trib* delivery truck pulled up, got out, and asked if he could help, my father, normally a mild and uncontentious man, told him to get the hell back into his truck, he didn't need his help. That, I believe, provides a nice example both of being ticked to the max and, as my father telling the story used to point out, of the irrationality of passionate anger.

Do my own peeves perform the function of getting my circulation going for me? Why is it that I find it difficult to imagine life without them? Everywhere I turn, I find these peeves awaiting me. I watch a movie in which one character, putatively a writer, claims that he and his lady friend "love one another"—"each other," I mutter. I get a letter from a business acquaintance written on the bottom of my own letter to him, and I think, "Ah, the CCNY school of business-letter writing." The first person I knew who wrote on the bottom of letters was the late Irving Howe; then I discovered that others who went to CCNY in the 1930s did so as well. Something mildly slovenly about it, I have always thought, something that suggests that your letter isn't worth saving, or that your correspondent is too busy to get out a clean sheet of stationery, or that you are not really worthy of clean stationery. In any case, receiving such a letter does, ever so slightly, tend to tick.

But, then, you might say, what, for me, doesn't? From the presence on my television screen of the last eight presidents of the United States to the gradual disappearance of the hyphen in such words as *antiestablishment*, not much, I have to report. How to account for this low-grade yet wide-ranging irritability? Ought I to double my dosage of wine with dinner? Am I a candidate for Prozac or some other pill that will put a finer sheen upon life for me? The fear, of course, is that I shall turn into a crank, if I am not one already.

Delacroix at the age of fifty-five writes in his journal of having recently read Joseph Addison on old age and being in complete agreement with "his placing tranquility in the first rank among the advantages which age gives us over youth." He then most tranquilly discourses on the lessening ambition that men in mature life ought to feel, asking, "Is there anything more ridiculous than agitating oneself at the age when everything invites us or forces us to repose?" He goes on to posit that even "the man of merit whom circumstances have not favored should still, in the situation where his declining years are passed, enjoy the calm which that situation brings with it." How sensible, how thoughtful, how philosophical! How contradictory, however, that in the journal entry preceding this one, Delacroix is on the attack against the mediocrity of his own time. "No one imagines to what degrees mediocrity abounds: Lefuel, Baltard, a thousand examples press in on one, of men having heavy commissions in the arts, in the government, in the armies, in everything. Those are



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the people who everywhere block the machinery set in motion by men of talent." Delacroix, there can't be much doubt about it, is ticked.

Is being ticked, mildly or madly, the natural state of human beings, since, shall we say, the permanent age of transition that began with departure from the Garden of Eden? It seems to be my natural state. Being steadily and readily ticked, I sometimes begin to feel, is rather like having tics: it may not be elegant, but it does give one something to do.

Yet how much I would prefer serenity to this regular low-level agitation that I seem to visit upon myself. *Serene*—what a beautiful word! How I aspire to the condition it describes! How pleasing it would be to exist above all this fiddle of popular culture and manners! How much finer to be like Santayana in Rome—polite, cool, and informal, passionate only in my vocation, well above the usual jumble of ordinary irritations! Or even to be like the late Joseph Brodsky, of whose belief in hierarchy Czeslaw Milosz recently wrote: " . . . *hierarchy* means respect for that which is elevated and unconcern, rather than scorn, for that which is base." Yes, that is it exactly—"unconcern, rather than scorn, for that which is base." Unticked, beyond ticking, tick-free.

Arguably . . . but here we come directly up against the problem. That word *arguably*—such a weak word, a word for people who like to sit on the fence (and may they come away with many small and painful splinters), content to say that something can be argued rather than getting down in the trenches and arguing it one way or the other. Why would anyone wish to use such a word unless he is fearful of taking a position? What semantic cowardice! What wimpishness! I'm ticked, as you can plainly see, ticked once again—nicely, happily, inevitably ticked—ticked to the min and, I suppose I may as well face it, ticked for life.



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# The Unmarked Way

OSCAR HANDLIN

At some point, midway into the twentieth century, Europeans and Americans discovered that they had lost all sense of direction. Formerly, familiar markers along the way had guided their personal and social lives from birth to maturity to death. Now, disoriented, they no longer trusted the guideposts and groped in bewilderment toward an unimagined destination. Wandering in the dark, men and women in all Western societies, stumbling blindly along, strained unavailingly for glimpses of recognizable landmarks.

The Second World War marked a decisive break in experience. At about 1945, as the great convulsive conflict approached its climax, shocking changes buffeted traditional faith. Until then, despite the wrenching transition of Western society from a rural agricultural to an urban industrial base and despite the explosive development of science, the sense of some direction and purpose in human affairs had remained largely intact. That sense of direction faded soon thereafter.

People who matured in the last quarter of the nineteenth century knew whence they came and also to what destination they moved. The most important thinkers in their tradition, the most important writers in their literary canons, supported their inherited conceptions of the past that established their location in the stream of history and therefore in the universe. Milton's towering verses persuasively situated generations of Europeans and Americans in a comprehensible position in a universal drama. From Edward Johnson's *Wonder-Working Providence* to George Bancroft's *History,* the message bore endless repetition in the New World. A known beginning and a foreseeable future framed all particular events. Moreover, Americans were not alone in nursing such millennial dreams for their New Jerusalem, for their promised land, dreams that infused their nationalism and sustained faith in their manifest destiny. For Johann H. Wichem (1808–

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1881), all German history formed part of the sacred unfolding of God's kingdom on earth, begun with ancient Israel, continued by the Reformation, and leading onward to human salvation. Everywhere in the West men and women understood exactly when and how the world began—at the Creation—and when and how it would arrive at a millennial terminus, its reason for existence fulfilled. The bolder of them also believed that they knew why God had created the heavens and the earth, and why He had given them being. They knew, therefore, their exact location on the path that led from a fixed point of departure to a fixed place of arrival. Individuals speculated about the degree of freedom along the way but clearly and precisely understood the purpose of their lives.

Because of this confidence in a knowable past and foreseeable future, a defined present resisted vast social, cultural, and intellectual changes. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment had shattered the binding force of authority and elevated reason and secular knowledge to primacy in human thought. But those profound mutations caused no erosion in the inherited concept of continuity of destiny. Divine Providence became progress, and God became a celestial watchmaker, but the certainty endured that history moved in a linear fashion from a beginning to a terminus.

The enduring capacity for assimilating faith and knowledge through much of the nineteenth century left intact traditional beliefs about the nature and destiny of man. What contemporaries often referred to as the warfare between science and religion involved a frequent flourish of arms, but in the end rarely drew blood. The higher criticism, emanating from Germany, at first raised shocking doubts about the literal accuracy of the Scriptures. But dexterity at interpretation ultimately subsumed the queries of skeptics and yielded a conception of the Bible as a literary document, so that its hold on popular thought remained firm through the nineteenth century.

Sir Charles Lyell's discoveries in geology more ominously challenged firmly held assumptions about the age of the earth and therefore also called for a reconsideration of Old Testament views of the creation. But behold, in performing this reconsideration, geologists and biologists discovered new wonders, which only briefly resisted incorporation into the traditional understanding and in the end confirmed the providential evidence of the workings of God's will. In the 1850s, English and American readers learned from Tennyson's cheerful reassurance that all was well in a universe that operated according to the rules of progress. The youth in *Locksley Hall* surveyed centuries that reposed behind him like fruitful land; he clung to the present for the promise it enclosed; and, peering toward the future "saw the Vi-



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sion of the world, and all the wonder that would be," with war drums still and battle flags furled "in the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the world"—an echo of the romantic aspiration, *Alle Menschen werden Bruder.* Even the great mystery of death ceased to conceal its secrets. *In Memoriam*'s confrontation with mortality revealed "that something good" would be "the final goal of ill." For nothing walked with aimless feet and not one life was wasted, not a worm in vain was cloven and not a moth with vain desire was shriveled in a fruitless fire. In Nature's grand scheme, "those we call the dead are breathers of an ampler day for ever nobler ends."

Though conservative thinkers objected, the dilution of faith by the sciences comforted most readers. The adjustment prepared them for Darwinism, which, for all the initial shock it provoked, ultimately fell into place in the inherited explanation of human destiny. Belief in progress toward a higher race prepared people to accept the concepts of evolution and of survival of the fittest. Tennyson had already shown how to make the necessary adjustment; he had drawn on new knowledge to explain that

> The solid earth whereon we tread
> In tracts of fluid heat began,
> And grew to seeming-random forms,
> The seeming prey of cyclic storms.
> Till at the last arose the man;
> Who throve and branched from clime to clime,
> The herald of a higher race.

After 1890, however, the inherited cultural and social continuum dissolved, thereby diminishing certainties about the purpose of human endeavor. The conception of a known past and a foreseeable future survived but lost the capacity to absorb novelty. Bombarded by new impressions, confronted by new problems, people continued to reach for a sense of purpose; but with their inner stability enfeebled, many drifted with no sense of ultimate destination or of immediate personal goals. Unable to clutch at meaningful explanations of their origins or destiny, they lost the ability to quiet doubts and hesitations. These matters concerned, in the first instance, clergymen, philosophers, and other intellectuals. But the effects gradually permeated the thoughts of other men and women.

Social change stilled the common language of worship. True, in the practice of religion, habit made for inertia if not for stability and, for generations, stiffened resistance to novelty. Wherever peasants remained important, they clutched at tradition. For them, science—remote and irrelevant—did not clash with religion, which served func-



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tions other than that of a way of knowing. Whatever happened in the laboratories, inherited faith remained the basis of a communal ritual and continued to serve a consolatory function. As long as their communities remained intact, those people, satisfied by customary answers, raised no questions on through the twentieth century.

Even when the great displacements of urbanization, industrialization, and migration moved millions out of their homes, they carried their faiths with them and long held to the old beliefs. It was for them that Cardinal Henry E. Manning in England and Bishop Bernard McQuaid in the United States spoke against the modernizing tendences of Cardinals John H. Newman and James Gibbons. Where the entrenched established churches refused to accommodate themselves to the newcomers, the migrants devised equivalents of their own in a multitude of chapels and sects. The dramatic impact of diversity reflected through the accounts of European observers made sectarianism seem primarily an American phenomenon. But there were counterparts also in Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia, and Jules Blois, in his *Petites Religions de Paris* (1894), mentioned a host of little sects in that city. In a sense, also, the anarchist movements in Mediterranean countries played an analogous role in the lives of urban laborers as a surrogate for lost religions, supplying their members with occasions for ritual as well as an explanatory scheme for history, past and prospective, that gave direction and meaning to daily life.

The aristocrats, at the other end of the social scale, retained a proprietary relationship to traditional religion that located them in an establishment of defined institutions connected with place, family, and status. Many of these people also discovered aesthetic values in the act of worship that made a quest for other meaning superfluous. But even aristocrats felt the effects of changes that disordered the communities about them and therefore jolted their own positions. For, the network of relationships with others upon which their status depended had lost cohesiveness even before 1914, and it disintegrated thereafter.

Middle-class men and women enjoyed no stability whatever. They faced a painful dilemma. Science had been important to them as a way of knowing. But in the twentieth century it increasingly divorced itself from common sense—that is, from comprehensibility. The invisible world of whirly atoms and remote galaxies ceased to provide a reliable guide to daily life, for it no longer offered ordinary people a structure of information and meaning comprehensible in terms of rationality and utility. To such questions as when to buy or sell, how to vote, whom to marry, economics, political science, or sociology offered no clear answers, and the great discoveries of physics and astronomy,



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however impressive in the abstract, remained remote from practicality. Indeed, in offices and shops those forms of knowledge often appeared disorienting. "This accursed science," expostulated one of the characters in an H. G. Wells novel, is "the very Devil. . . . You tamper with it . . . and it offers you gifts. And directly you take them it knocks you to pieces in some unexpected way. Old passions and new weapons—now it upsets your religion, now it upsets your social ideas, now it whirls you off to desolation and misery!" The insistence endured that some purpose ordered it all. Yet the effort of ordinary folk to square traditional faith with science produced agonizing personal and social problems.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, observers began to interpret the phenomenon of suicide as an extreme of the state of purposelessness. Thomas G. Masaryk's pioneering study concluded that suicide often resulted from the spread of *halbbildung,* partial education expressed in a superficial disorganized culture that eroded traditional views of the universe but replaced them with no adequate counterparts. Somewhat later, and in a different fashion, Emile Durkheim described *anomie,* by which he meant isolation from social groupings that left individuals unable to locate themselves in any larger scheme of the universe. Whatever the differences among them, such commentators agreed on the desirability of conveying to aimless individuals some replacement for the lost sense of direction by reestablishing traditional values accommodated to new conditions or by an improved division of labor to firmly locate individuals in society.

They thus sought means of restoring the former certitude. The longing for definiteness beguiled many into the hope that the will to believe was adequate faith. By recognizing their own needs, individuals could attain a personal therapy, a source of social discipline, and a mode of individual orientation. Matthew Arnold in Britain and William James in the United States explained that their readers could pragmatically reconcile what they knew through science with the faith not knowable through science, both useful in their own ways.

Willing to believe, however, was not the same as believing. The search for faith out of the need for therapy, could not establish a commitment secure enough to guide people through life, while the drift into cultural relativism leveled all standards and obscured all sense of direction. In the shrieking silence of the urban landscape perceived by Edvard Munch and Edward Hopper, men and women could at best aim to achieve a personal calm—be true to one another while the world, like a land of dreams, offered "neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" to those who



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wandered "as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies" clashed by night. In that setting, Sigrid Undset's *Jenny* found refuge only in the thought that she could put an end to suffering by putting an end to her life.

The blur grew more opaque when people confronted the excess of choices devised by intellectuals who continued to speculate about past, present, and future. Academic philosophers, theologians, and historians, journalists, novelists, poets, and critics floated about in the interstices of Western society, linked to aristocratic patrons and to audiences from the middle classes, yet absorbed in preoccupations of their own. For intellectuals, the lack of congruence between science and religion rarely created practical personal dilemmas but did present interesting abstract theoretical problems. To William James it sometimes seemed that the history of philosophy consisted of two parts, "first the wanton creation of difficulties and artificialities by intellectualism" and then "the struggle back to the dramatic concreteness of common sense after remanding intellectualism to its proper subordinate place."

The abstract problem had for some time been clear. When Nietszche read Darwin, he proclaimed "God is dead." The doctrine of the fluidity of all species erased the cardinal distinction, once a truism, between humans and others. Tennyson's easy verses now did not withstand rigorous philosophical or sociological analysis. A quite different problem thereafter challenged intellectuals poised between being and nothingness, like Thomas Mann's characters in *Magic Mountain* and in *Felix Krull.* In the absence of the guiding hand of God/Nature did the ethical and historical meaninglessness of the universe follow?

The abstract question interested intellectuals. But it created no dilemmas for them. Lacking ties to institutions, they readily made adjustments, as in a game. Not even bound to rationality, but open to feeling, they elaborated as they wished. If they willed to believe, they could do so—even will a tradition into being. And they could certainly conjure up abundant explanations of human destiny, among which other people could pick and choose.

By explaining away realities, the will to believe kept the idea of progress alive as an intellectual proposition despite all the calamities of the first quarter of the twentieth century. In *Women in Love* (1920), D. H. Lawrence wrote with enthusiasm, "If humanity ran into a *cul de sac* and expended itself, the timeless creative mystery would bring forth some other being, finer, more wonderful, some new more lovely race, to carry on. . . . The game was never up." The fathomless mystery of creation, infallible, inexhaustible, endured forever. "Races came



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and went, species passed away, but ever new species arose, more lovely or equally lovely, always surpassing wonder. To be man was as nothing compared to the possibilities of the creative mystery . . . the perfect pulse throbbed with indescribable being, miraculous unborn species."

H. G. Wells could also combine science and mysticism, although ambiguous elements often infected his certainty.

> But through the confusion . . . something drives, something that is at once human achievement and the most inhuman of all existing things. Something comes out of it. . . . Sometimes I call this reality Science, sometimes I call it Truth. But it is something that we draw by pain and effort out of the heart of life, that we disentangle and make clear. . . . It is the one enduring thing. Men and nations, epochs and civilizations pass, each making its contribution. I do not know what it is, this something, except that it is supreme. . . . It emerges from life with each year one lives and feels, and generation by generation and age by age, but the how and why of it are beyond the compass of my mind.

The same cheerfulness lay embedded in the apparent pessimism of Spengler's *Decline of the West* and later also in Toynbee's *A Study of History.* Both works explained the whole sweep of the human past by tracing cycles of the rises and declines of civilizations. Twentieth-century readers could find consolation in the reflection that mutations had thus far brought mankind to an ever higher plane. Without the firm anchor of a precise point of departure or the goal of a precise destination, writers could tilt the incline upward or downward at will. However, the more sensitive, such as Robinson Jeffers, sounded a gloomy tone ("Original Sin"):

> As for me, I would rather
> Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man
> But we are what we are, and we might remember
> Not to hate any person, for all are vicious
> And not to be astonished by any evil, all are deserved:
> And not fear death; it is the only way to be cleansed.

As did Hardy: people tricked by their own early dreams and by the need for solace deceived themselves and made their maker what they deemed; and what they imagined they believed, till uncompromising rude reality mangled the Monarch of their fashioning, who quavered, sank, and ceased to be. Their plaint:

> So, toward our myth's oblivion,
> Darkling and languid-lipped, we creep and grope
> Sadlier than those who wept in Babylon,
> Whose Zion was a still abiding hope.



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How sweet it was in years far hied
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer
To lie down liegely at the eventide
And feel a blest assurance He was there!

That was gone.

I understood, said a character in Julian Green's *Varouna*, "that we are blind and deaf, that we come from the night to return to the night without conceiving anything of our destiny."

Pessimism clouded social as well as personal reflections.

With mechanization, the man at his tool slipped day by day ever deeper into sameness and monotony, wheel by wheel in whirring hum yet never cogged within next wheel or next wheel. Motions roaring upwards into emptiness, unresisted, hurtled down to earth again. The German expressionist Georg Kaiser predicted the failure of any effort to form an ethical society, with socialism leading inexorably to self-extermination. In his *Gas II* (1920) the world approached apocalyptic destruction. Society having turned man into a machine, frustrating his sense of the wholeness of life, eventually deadened his native faculties, suppressed his aspirations, and distorted his sense of life. Karl Capek's *R.U.R.*, Elmer Rice's *Adding Machine*, René Clair's *A Nous la Liberté*, and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* explored the same theme. *Mississippi*, Kaiser's final play, revealed the ultimate escape—death.

A decade earlier, Anatole France had cynically described all institutions as products of greed, stupidity, and violence, passing through cycles of cataclysm and regrowth. In *Penguin Island* (1909), Doctor Obnubile, observing the incurable folly and wickedness of man, concluded that but one good action remained to be done. "The wise man will collect enough dynamite to blow up this planet. When its fragments fly through space an imperceptible amelioration will be accomplished in the universe and a satisfaction will be given to the universal conscience. Moreover, this universal conscience does not exist."

Harsher still was the novel *The Confessions of Zeno*, published in Italy in 1923—about the time when Kaiser wrote—that speculated:

> That melancholy industrious animal—man—may discover new forces and harness them to his chariot. Such danger is in the air. The result will be a great abundance—of human beings! Every square yard will be occupied by a man. Who will be able then to cure us of lack of air and space? . . .
>
> Perhaps some incredible disaster produced by machines will lead us back to health.
>
> When all the poison gases are exhausted, a man, made like all other men of flesh and blood, will, in the quiet of his room, invent an explosive of such potency that all the explosives in existence will seem like harmless toys



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beside it. And another man, made in his image and in the image of all the rest, but a little weaker than them, will steal that explosive and crawl to the center of the earth with it, and place it just where he calculates it will have a maximum effect. There will be a tremendous explosion, but no one will hear it and the earth will return to its nebulous state and go wandering through the sky, free at last from parasites and disease.

By the time those sentences were written, intellectuals had expressed all the fears of the future that would move people on through the rest of the twentieth century. Cataclysm became a literary staple—alien invasions from space, wars of the worlds, environmental change, mysterious diseases—all there, early in the century, not nightmares conjured up in the sixties and seventies.

Intellectuals could afford to believe any of the abstract variables they manipulated because they treated the ideas as problems in history or philosophy or drama, problems to which they sought solutions satisfying in terms of their own crafts. The outcome of the quest created no dilemma for them in daily life, for they had after 1890 achieved considerable isolation from mundane affairs. A book that predicted one outcome could sell as well as one that predicted its opposite. But whatever the judgment about the direction or dynamics of movement, there was no recapturing the older certainty about point of departure or destination—about *why*. There was hence no recapturing the sense of purpose to human existence for which readers hungered.

For Albert Camus the situation between being and nothingness seemed absurd, that is, out of harmony with reason or propriety, incongruous, illogical—devoid of purpose. Cut off from religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, humans drifted, all their actions senseless, useless. "In the universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of the memories of the lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce "between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurd." In those feverish wartime years, death's dark wind blew from the future, and the fighters learned the benign indifference of the universe. They felt no certainty that there ever was an orderly relation of man to God and could only contemplate the absurd confrontation between human needs and the world's unreasonable silence (*Sisyphus,* p.4), which, however, did not freeze them in inaction.

In *The Stranger* (1942), the examining magistrate drew himself up to his full height and asked very earnestly whether Meurseult believed



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in God, then plumped down into his chair indignantly when the answer was no. That was unthinkable, he said; all men believe in God, even those who reject Him. If he ever came to doubt it, his life would lose all meaning. Meurseult nevertheless acted as he had to, without illusions.

That doctrine might titillate intellectuals, but it hardly satisfied the longing of other people for guidance, as they traced by awkward steps the unmarked path of life's journey. For the alternative, which no one wished to embrace, yet which hovered over all in ever more threatening fashion after 1945, was the utter blankness of it: no beginning, no end, no purpose. Was it all random?

Put it this way. People by 1945 could no longer be sure of the direction in which history took them. But they could still be sure that there was a direction; and they could, if they wished, select among a variety of theories that described their destination. After 1945, they could ever less often be sure even that any direction to human affairs existed at all, that they were not totally adrift in a meaningless universe. Something had profoundly altered their outlook on human destiny.

Year after year, Western societies expended ever larger amounts on scientific research and development. In 1988 the United States alone spent $123 billion in public and private funds for that purpose. In 1993 the total had soared to $160 billion, in addition to very large sums on pure science and medicine, all in the hope that great leaping advances in knowledge would transform life. Yet each such expensive advance in science and technology touched off a wave of panic out of fear that it might attain its goal—that is, transform life. Anything new could unleash forces of incalculable power, with uncertain and unpredictable repercussions. Hence the loss of nerve when confronted with the prospect of further change, a reaction particularly vivid when it came to any potential alteration of the environment. Not enough to cut back on expenditures, only just enough to increase apprehension.

Why the panic?

The plausible—but false—answer to the question fixes on the apparent causes of fear: the atom bomb, global war, totalitarianism, dehumanizing machines, poverty—all long-since foreseen, images familiar from the past. These apparent causes of fear no more survive rational explanation than do the images of a nightmare, each coherent in the moment of its salience, then flashing away when some other appears, each not quite consistent with that which replaces it, indeed, sometimes quite contradictory. Dependence upon atomic energy strikes terror in the hearts of the half-educated and well-intentioned



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who, however, also know that the use of fossil fuels increases the dangers of acid rain and of the greenhouse effect. Animal rights activists obstruct medical research although they thereby hamper efforts to cure the diseases of humans. No wonder that anxiety infuses every occasion for making a choice, as it also does in many medical dilemmas.

The nuclear threat provides reason enough for concern if not for panic—so new, so terrible in the form of a bomb dropped, a missile launched or airborne, even an occasional leak or the gesture of a terrorist individual or state. Still, Hiroshima and Nagasaki pale in destructiveness when compared with other tragic twentieth-century events, natural disasters, typhoons, famines, and civil wars. And some reassurance should have come—but did not—from the fact that the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl incidents failed to follow the doomsday scenarios. For fifty years, the poised missiles remained uneventfully in their silos, and the American stockpile, measured in megatonnage, declined after 1967 by some 75 percent. Such considerations did not quiet the fears of the scientists who huddled annually at Cyrus Eaton's Pugwash.

War? True, hardly a year passed after 1945 unstained by bloodshed in some part of the earth. But the global conflagration that seemed plausible fifty years ago did not materialize; and the Western world enjoyed a half century of relative peace after 1945.

Totalitarianism? George Orwell set his dire predictions in 1984. Twelve years later, totalitarianism was everywhere in retreat. True, the recent past saw Stalin's unbelievably brutal crushing of the Ukrainian peasantry, Mussolini's trampling upon the Italian civil order, and Hitler's Final Solution culminating in the Holocaust. Well before 1945, perceptive observers had anticipated and then described those horrible revelations of the reality of evil. But in the 1980s the tide of events had moved in another direction without quieting fears. Not even the greatest optimists then predicted the reversal of trends in Eastern as well as in Western Europe, in the Soviet Union as well as in the People's Republic of China, in South America as well as in South Africa. Military dictators still govern the great majority of the world's population, but the areas of totalitarian rule have steadily contracted and nowhere seem likely once more to expand.

So, too, automation, which opened into the computer age and the information revolution, proved an empty threat. Early twentieth-century writers had already explored the machines' dehumanizing effects; and whatever happened after 1945 had already provided material for artistic depiction in far more lurid form before that date so that later reality proved less painful than the somber imaginative forebodings.



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Poverty, homelessness, social delinquency—the grave problems that shadowed the actuality of 1996 in a sober comparison were far less grave than sixty years earlier, when the unemployed millions, penniless, fled the dust bowls and the stagnant towns and tramped the roads or rode the rails, lacking any claim to aid. The steady improvement in the human condition showed up in the most accurate of all gauges of well-being—life expectancy—which everywhere climbed, even taking into account the disastrous effects of social experiments in Ethiopia, sub-Saharan Africa, and China.

Appraisal of the failure of nerve amounting to panic calls for recognition of the difference in reaction between the intellectuals and others. The profound gulf between them, already open in 1945, widened thereafter. The half century after that date saw an enormous expansion in the number of intellectuals and para-intellectuals, that is, of persons who performed tasks based on some technical education—not only physicians, attorneys, clergymen, and teachers but also millions engaged in the impersonal bureaucracies of insurance, commerce, finance, education, health care, television, cinema, journalism, advertising, and government. Early in the century, a few—Kafka, Schmitz, Undset—had expressed their views in obscurity. Most remained silent. Half-educated, the paraprofessionals knew how to perform one task well, but knew little more, yet earned adequate salaries and enjoyed a great deal of leisure. They aligned themselves uncomfortably with the writers, philosophers, scientists, and publicists who formed the earlier intellectual elite.

The private languages of specialization impeded communication among intellectuals and between them and others as each tight circle addressed only its own members. The process of isolation began early in the arts when modern painting, sculpture, music, and poetry required the viewer, listener, reader to apprehend without assistance what the creator had in mind. Philosophy achieved a level of technical complexity that conveyed meaning only to the highly trained. Mathematics infused economics and political science, even history, while physicists and chemists addressed primarily narrowing bands of peers within their own subspecialties. Ernst Mayr, a distinguished biologist of an older generation, found it no easy task to define terms that would permit colleagues in genetics, paleontology, taxonomy, embryology, and molecular biology to communicate with one another and also with scholars in anthropology, history, and philosophy. The tendency toward enclosed, self-contained little groupings spread to every area of technical competence, with the result that often the popularizers of the mass media offered the only connection among them, and



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usually did so in a distorted fashion. Irony: in the communication age men and women found it increasingly difficult to talk to one another. They could exchange fragments of information but not knowledge or wisdom.

Hence on the great issues that troubled people after 1945 the intellectuals remained largely silent, except when one or another of them yielded to the temptation of power. Pride of knowledge occasionally drew from scientists fatuous self-congratulatory statements, as when one of them pointed to "the increasing displacement of theocentric and anthropocentric views of the universe and nature." Self-satisfaction oozed out in his assertion that "the great discoveries of modern science produce their own humility, awe, and mystery," enhancing the "imputation of sacredness to the environment" and opening the way to a far-reaching technology-based morality. The complacent scientist who wrote those words was unaware that he merely repeated phrases mouthed a century or more before. But in any case, what was the message of humility, awe, and mystery modern evolutionary theory delivered? "We are here," wrote Stephen Jay Gould, "because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could tranform into legs." So much for human dignity. But then, genuine wrongheadedness in science, as in most fields of endeavor, presupposed considerable education, character, sophistication, knowledge, and the will to success—which made Nobel laureates, as a group, more consistently wrong in pronouncements on political and social issues than any other aggregation of adults.

The will to believe swayed intellectuals more than other people. Clinging to faith in the beneficence of nature, they wished evil away, shrugging off the challenging issues—war, totalitarianism, holocaust, cultural revolution—as derived from misunderstanding, and holding fast the certainty that good could/would cure all ills.

Even less than other men and women were they prepared to confront on personal terms the issues of the nature and destiny of humans in the inescapable crises that befell all creatures of flesh and blood. Those proud edifices they reared of knowledge and theory suddenly proved insubstantial, quivered into nothingness, at the death—always untimely—of a beloved child or a spouse. At such moments, the clever and articulate proved no more capable of coping with emotions than the very poor, deprived, damaged, and underprivileged folk never insulated from life and therefore from death.

Nor did intellectuals find it easy to cope with great social crises. Early on in the twentieth century, the idea of progress had ceased to carry conviction as a general description of the human situation; the naïve myth of an innocent, bygone era that deluded people, unaware



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that major advances in science and technology required assessment of negative consequences not manifest until after many years.

But if not progress, then what? To that question science in the half century after 1945 provided no answer. On the one hand, it escalated claims that it could transform nature—on the other hand, science failed to provide a satisfactory guide to life or to explain the direction of human development, a failure most evident in the social sciences, but also in other tests in practice.

Unsettled, without firm ties to family and community, the intellectuals accepted uncritically the vivid scenarios for disaster the media flashed before them. Unprepared by half-education to use the abundant leisure at their disposal, they yielded to sensationalism: the images of violence, brutality, and sexuality directed at viewers and listeners by the uninhibited media, which stifled rationality, stimulated inchoate feelings and left a residue of dread of an unpredictable, empty future.

Such people, particularly vulnerable to the obliteration of the markers along the way from past to present and, hence, to future, lacked a clear view of their destination and, ever more frightening, could not even be certain whether any destination existed. The doubts compounded the risks of their lives' journeys. The failure of nerve did not spring from the novelty of the challenges after 1945. All the dangers had been anticipated, described in detail, earlier. But back then most men and women who accepted hazards as a matter of course still retained a measure of confidence that, somehow, what they did fell into a pattern that led from the past to the present and on to the future, though the nature of that future was neither as clear nor as optimistic as earlier. Few—even among intellectuals—doubted before 1945 that they could orient themselves in a meaningful course running through time. They lost that certainty after the end of the Second World War.

A commonly expressed fear illustrated the magnitude of the change. In the general worry about nuclear energy, a recurrent theme stressed the dangers of genetic damage. Out of control, the power might cause profound mutations, perhaps threaten the very survival of the species. The concern rested upon the implicit premise that the appearance of MAN marked the end of evolution, that no further development was desirable or even possible.

Why?

Perfection?

Perhaps a few mutations would help.

Habit and tradition, the support of governments and of clerics,



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along with popular acquiescence had long made churches the custodians of faith in Western society, responsible for inculcating dogma in the young and for lending cohesion to the community through rituals and ceremonies marking the salient events of birth, marriage, and death. For a decade after 1945 a vigorous revival of religion seemed in full swing. Popular books promised peace of mind and delivered power in positive thinking. Revivalists attracted great crowds in the United States; and imposing new structures clothed in contemporary concrete displayed the same modernity as schools or shopping centers or office blocks. Statistics, such as they were, seemed to reveal a rise in church membership, though not always in attendance or participation. Down into the 1960s the same situation prevailed throughout the Western world,

Dramatically, swiftly, it changed—everywhere. Since, for historic reasons, the United States gathered no religious statistics, the more graphic illustration of the trend came from north of its border. In 1960, the Presbyterian moral fervor of its founders still governed Ontario and its metropolis, the "good city," Toronto. The Province of Quebec, equally stern in its Catholicism, could boast without exaggeration that every communicant was observant. A quarter of a century later, Ontario's sternness had wilted and less than 15 percent of Quebec's Catholics remained observant, a falling away that occurred despite the church's old links to language, culture, and politics. The identical trend occurred everywhere but in Africa.

The tempting but inaccurate explanation linked the spreading apathy to social and economic change and more particularly to the shift from a rural agricultural base to an urban industrial one. But the identical forces—urbanization and industrialization—that were involved a century earlier in the worldwide migration from country to town and across the Atlantic, had a contrary effect. Then, the churches and the faiths they nurtured survived intact, even grew in strength. Something else accounted for the most recent changes.

The seeds of weakness sprouted in the boom days of the 1950s. Then, the ad man's ubiquitous plea had greeted the hesitant, on car cards and radio announcements—*visit the church of your choice!* Why not? The selection of a house of worship, entirely voluntary, rarely made any creedal demands upon the entrant. Increasingly, well-bred people frowned upon intolerance and particularly upon that form which required the individual to subscribe to a defined article of faith; an acquiescent temper blurred differences. The propositions over which zealous believers had once slaughtered one another now took on a quaint, antique aspect, certainly not serious enough to divide the



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saved from the damned. Adherents of any religion, or of none, could equally well lead good lives. The assumption that ethical behavior alone counted disposed of the need for uncomfortable or even embarrassing choices, as for instance in the growing number of intermarriages. With either alternative equally good, a toss of the coin could decide whether to rear the offspring in one faith or the other.

Then, too, with the passing decades, memories faded of old controversies in remote places that had once upon a time set one sect off against another. The clergy and lay people alike now valued accommodation, the resolution rather than the preservation of inherited causes of separateness. The process of smoothing out creedal peculiarities tended to homogenize all elements and to lessen the unique importance of belonging. The earlier efforts to sustain distinctiveness no longer seemed worthwhile. Images of a normal/norm encouraged by the media left people wary of a specific identity, of developing strong opinions and convictions, of becoming definite and particular, and that diluted emotions and beliefs. Affiliation became a matter of choice rather than of conversion, and disaffiliation became not a dramatic gesture but a product of apathy.

A profound transformation of family life also affected (and was affected by) slackening religious ties. *The family that prays together stays together* had been the old-time slogan. But now families neither stayed together nor prayed together, as the soaring number of single-parent households testified. Drastic changes in the role of women and in birth control effaced the image of the home as citadel of faith and replaced it with the image of home as the location of the VCR. Characteristically, Quebec's birth rate, once one of the world's highest, plummeted to the point at which French Canadians no longer reproduced themselves.

In the face of attrition, the shepherds of the bewildered flocks fixed their attention elsewhere and rarely if ever called on divine authority to point the correct way. How could they, lacking as they did the theistic content that had drained away from their faith?

Not long ago, John Mortimer—London barrister but also literary man about town—interviewed the heads of the English churches, nice fellows who chatted about this subject and that, candidly without embarrassment as befitted equals. In the course of Mortimer's conversation with Robert Runcie, then Archbishop of Canterbury, an awkward queston intruded:

Do you believe in God?

No ready answer, only a qualified—well, sort of, in a manner of speaking. Honest. But nothing there to inspire certitude in a clergy



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laden with doubts, in parishoners eager for firm affirmations. With few exceptions, the great religious leaders after 1970 backed away from positive assertions of God's will in human affairs. Even the word from Rome, after aggiornamento, came forth in muted tones. Not until December 1985 did a synod of bishops reassert the importance of the transcendental element in Christianity; and it was only in the year following that the Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation reminded the faithful of the paramount importance of salvation. Church officials, after all, shared the hesitancy of other intellectuals in shying away from firm theistic affirmations.

A decline in the number of vocations, the repudiation of vows by the clergy who left their posts, and the diversion of interests toward mundane concerns significantly outlined the trend. However worthy the objective, involvement by nuns and priests, by ministers and rabbis, in politics, in efforts to deal with poverty, and in a commitment to implementing the goals of liberation theology rested on no theistic worldview or even on an assertion of any sense of the direction of human destiny. Such activities hardly differentiated the clergy from lay reformers and social workers, or indeed from other well-intentioned people without faith.

In the absence of a sense of the transcendent, the clergy blended into the mass of other intellectuals busily purveying programs to rectify the immediate ills of society, to reform or improve conditions out of a commitment to the traditional values of the testaments. Or, as in *States of Grace* or *Mackerel Plaza*, they simply enacted rituals, games for the pleasure or aesthetic satisfaction of it. But no more than others did they feel a compulsion to ask why or to grope for an answer. No more than others did they frame their urgings in a context of meaningful destiny. The failure to discern a more significant pattern to life reflected disorientation on the part of people who knew neither whence they came nor where they would go, who knew not even whether there was any direction at all to the drift. In the Vegas Hot Rock Casino, the programmer over from L.A. plays the "rain forest slots"; even if luck is against her, part of the take goes to protect the environment.

Yet a shift in the focus of attention from the intellectuals to the men and women immersed in the affairs of the world brings into view a quite different situation.

In the spring of 1979, New Yorkers saw two movies, each of which—though in different ways—catered to the will to escape reality and to find refuge in illusion, which, no doubt, explained their popularity at the box office. The films provided what their audiences



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sought, though they did not satisfy the critics and received only lukewarm or hostile notices.

*The Promise* opens with a question. The young man and the young woman, intent upon one another, ask the question and receive the answer.

"Do you believe in God?"

"No."

They do not believe in God.

But they believe in something. They know not what.

The movie is about what they believe, which the audience finds credible.

An unexpected violent accident changes the girl's appearance. The boy mistakenly believes her dead, the error nurtured by his possessive mother.

The girl, however, won't tell him that she is alive. Therefore they wander apart, adrift, unrecognized. She is a photographer and a painter. As he passes a shop window, a glimpse of her work—unidentified—unaccountably attracts him. Later they meet face to face at a party. Still no recognition. However, she explains that something in her comes out in the canvasses or prints, and in time he recognizes her through her painting. That is, the movie implies, beneath the surface appearances, something manifests itself that makes her known to him. An earlier, more certain, generation might have referred to it as "soul."

The audience of 1979, like these characters, believes in something but does not know in what. And no one informs them.

Another movie, *Heaven Can Wait*, which shuns the appearance of seriousness by a jocular tone, nevertheless arrives at a similar conclusion. Here, too, action pivots upon an unexpected death. A football player, driving through a tunnel, suffers a fatal accident, after which he wanders through several bodies, taking on various appearances, then ends up, as he always wished to, a star in the Super Bowl. Here, too, the beloved recognizes the real person beneath the difference in appearance. But here, too, the script avoids any reference to "soul." As in *The Promise*, there is a will to believe but uncertainty about that in which to believe.

Again and again, the identical insistence upon *something there*, undefined, peeps through the glossy surface, unrecognized in a culture without a category into which it fits. On the television screen, June 19, 1986, the basketball coach is visibly shaken—Len Bias, his pride and joy, dead of a drug overdose. The mourner reaches for words, finally insists: They would meet again in heaven.

According to surveys in *Psychology Today*, 75 percent of Americans



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believe in the existence of a literal heaven and hell; probably 90 percent believe in God—"undefined." The persistent reach for *something there,* unarticulated, reveals itself in every uninhibited expression of popular culture.

Again the movies: *2001*—a sensate experience that fabricates a remote beginning, that peers toward an infinite future; its meaning hazy except insofar as it implies some transcendent continuity—an upscale version of science fiction, long a way of framing answers to questions about the universe a that modern rational society tolerated because clothed in fantasy. *Star Trek* extended with high-tech gadgetry the old fascination with out there. *Star Wars* even more so. And not by coincidence, a science fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard, became founder of a new religion, Scientology.

Yet those with faith in something out there rarely perceive the implications for daily life.

The links among science fiction, popular mysticism, and the avid hunger for answers to questions no one asked openly had long since become clear. Persuaded that there was no design and no evolution, that in human affairs everything happened by chance, Western men and women looked romantically at the vast potential of space into which the soul could expand (and out of which E.T. could drift). Old apocalyptic visions acquired fresh relevance. Hal Lindsay's best-selling prophecy, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) described in graphic detail how the last human generation approached the end. The spread of Communism, of pornography, of homosexuality, and of false cults, the signs of moral decline and Satanic ascension playing upon one another, prepared the way for war in the Middle East that ushered in the foreordained reign of Antichrist.

This context explains contemporary fundamentalism. The media purvey the inadequate impression of dark fanaticism—the ranting, on the one hand, of the ayatollahs and, on the other, of the Moral Majority and the Creationists. Such simplistic views fail to account for the popularity of these responses—not only in the Middle East, but also in North America and in Europe, a response attractive not only to Muslims, whose numbers in the United States have grown with immigration from Pakistan, India, and the Near East, but also to evangelical Christians and Hasidic Jews. In some cases, the impulse to fundamentalism led to hyperorthodoxy, but it asserted itself in established, stable denominations as well and also in schismatic sects, old and new, and in the lure of Far Eastern gurus. Polls repeatedly showed, for instance, that Episcopalians wanted their old prayer book back; and



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many Catholics preferred the Latin Mass of which modernization deprived them, a preference that drove Archbishop Lefebvre to schism. Blockbusters, big events connected with papal visits to Colorado, Boston, New York, or Baltimore, drew the faithful in the hundreds of thousands.

Fundamentalism, whatever its form, preserved religious faith by encasing it in a hard shell of belief detached from human history and experience. No matter what modern science uncovered, no matter what a rational reading of the past showed, that faith stood immovable, firm. Hence the fury believers directed against Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Although prophecy—the ability to hear directly and to convey God's word—persuaded few, except Louis Farrakhan's followers, many more accepted the reality of miracles—events out of the natural course such as faith healing and astrology. The devout put their trust in spells, blessings, or prayers addressed to guardian angels and particular saints and punished the unresponsive. (For failure to help sell the house in Chicago, St. Joseph's image ended up buried in the garden.) Fundamentalism thus reflected the yawning gulf between many ordinary people and the intellectuals, including the clergy who purported to speak for all.

These reactions shared a dislike for the ecclesiastical shift away from otherworldly attitudes. They protested against failure to anchor the lives of worshipers in a known beginning and a foreseeable end, the consequent loss of sense of direction or affirmation of goals. Even people who could not themselves perceive a clear purpose to the universe refused to accept the premise that random, meaningless forces ruled their lives.

They lived so far away from God, they knew, that He did not hear them when they prayed to Him for help. They understood that and also accepted the obligation to assist one another. The need they felt was not for miracles, but for the guideposts to mark the way along which they traveled.

Only rarely did they hear what they avidly longed to hear—suggestions of how they could act *as if*: as if there were a correct direction, even though one not known.

They were not, after all, philosophers or theologians occupied with probing the true nature of things, but people for whom common sense counted more. They understood that life's journey led them across difficult terrain, led them by hazards that they could not always surmount. In a course laden with risks, powerful gusts might compel them to alter direction, to go back in order to advance. But in all such turnings, the essential was—to remember which way was forward.



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A Swedish writer, observing the flight of gulls in a storm, at first thought that they flew backward, then understood that they were letting the wind carry them where it wished, for they lacked the power to resist. But they did not alter course—fly with the wind. Some inner mechanism informed them which was the way. Had they flown with the wind, they would have lost their sense of direction. Better to move backward, let the wind have its way, but retain the sense of direction.

In the face of the storm it is harder to fly backward than forward; and to do so with dignity demands more of people, as of gulls. True, flying backward, people and gulls alike make little progress. But they keep their sense of direction, know which way is forward.

Only with the marks along the way obliterated, humans, less fortunate than the gulls, can no longer depend upon that inner mechanism to inform them which way is forward. And those who sulk, lose composure, grow desperate, cry *all is lost,* cannot understand the dilemma of gradual retreat while keeping sight of the goal.

The storm in which the humans of 1996 fly is that created by the social effects of technology and affluence, by totalitarian impulses and the erosion of values, by art without form, by the relativism of science and the failure of other forms of knowledge to define goals or to establish reference points along the way. In that situation humans can only try to know which way is forward, in the hope, if not the faith, that the goal will some day still be there.

The long meanwhile remains, occupied by the day-to-day business of life, but uncharted in the haze of goals unapprehended. Schedules endure—times to rise and times to ride, work, learn, return, count the weeks to freedom trips, efface any reckoning of the number more fortunate, less fortunate, avoid the blank wall of purpose. To what end? That question, unanswered, breeds suppressed discontent among all who plod on alone.



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# *Clerihews for the Clerisy III*

ROGER DU BÉARN

*History must not only be done in,*
*but must be seen to be done in.*
—Lord MacGibbon

John Locke
Had a writing block;
He accordingly denied
The mind gets ideas from inside.

Jonathan Swift
Was visibly miffed:
His horse had implied it was new in him
To be kind to a Houynhnhm.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson,
Passed up the venison
For a fowl from the local emporium,
Over which he could chant *In Memoriam.*

Henry Gray
Knew his *Anatomy* had come to stay:
Human bones's shape and quota
Don't alter one iota.

Albert Einstein
Had a glass of wine,
Then said: "I feel its action
As a sort of Fitzgerald contraction."



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Robert Burton,
From behind a curtain,
Tried to tell his friends how jolly
It was to talk of melancholy.

Henry James
Named no names,
But The Bostonians knew
Who was Who.

Robert Frost
Turned and tossed.
His nightmare was, What to do
If the road branched into more than two?

William Makepeace Thackeray,
With his usual quackery,
When he came to the U.S.A.
Gave the same lecture every day.

Agatha Christie
Is no doubt twisty,
But her plots are notably nifty
And there are more than fifty.

Rebecca West
Never confessed
That the theme of her very best book
Revolted her cook.



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Honoré de Balzac
Got a lot of flak
For not running out of themes
After writing reams and reams.

Fra Savonarola
Loathed Coca-Cola;
To curb his bouts of catalepsy,
He guzzled Pepsi.

Henry Fielding
Was unyielding
On some points of English diction.
What a terrible affliction!

✪ ROGER DU BÉARN writes clerihews for a living and limericks for relaxation.



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# Rosina

## A Memoir

JEANEANE DOWIS LIPMAN

I FIRST SPOKE TO ROSINA LHEVINNE—the pianist, renowned teacher, and widow of Josef Lhevinne—on the telephone in Los Angeles on a hot June day in 1949. I was then sixteen, she was sixty-nine. She had suggested that I attend her six-week summer session at the Los Angeles Conservatory preparatory to auditioning for her Juilliard class in the fall.

After a forty-hour bus trip from Dallas, I was exhausted and nervous when I called her and secretly convinced that when she heard my name she would wither me with a "Who?" Not at all—indeed her response was of such an extraordinary warmth and sweetness that my nerves vanished and I heard with delight about my living accommodations. And to my utter surprise, she asked whether I would care to enter the Josef Lhevinne Scholarship competition the next day.

And so I did, reaching the finals, though convinced that everyone played rings around me. Sitting off to the side was this altogether adorable yet majestic little lady, who smiled warmly and encouragingly to me on my way in and out. How Rosina could combine the merriness of a teddy bear with the majesty of a czarina I never understood, but combine them she did. This did not make her easy to deal with because sometimes one thought one was talking to the teddy bear when suddenly from around the corner would rear the dragon-like czarina personality. But this bewildering realization lay in the future, and I unreservedly gave her my heart that afternoon.

What a contrast in behavior occurred one year later when I returned to L.A. to continue my studies and again to enter the Josef Lhevinne competition. Rosina sat as usual quite far away from the judges to make it perfectly clear that she had absolutely nothing to do with the outcome. This day she sat with hooded eyes, looking like

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nothing so much as a dour toad. Not only did she not give a warm smile of encouragement, she did not by so much as a flicker of an eyelash indicate that she had ever met me. This behavior being so at variance with what I had come to expect from her the preceding year, I left the auditorium crushed and convinced that my audition had somehow been a major disaster. There was never a more surprised person than I when the judges announced that I was the winner. Rosina came up, happy and full of warm congratulations. When I did not respond in kind, she immediately apologized for her behavior, explaining that she did not want the judges to get a hint of our relationship and thus influence the judging. In fact, my shock at her behavior made the very first crack in my deep love for this woman. It was not my first experience with coldness—far from it—but my previous experience had been with people who were mad as hell at me, never with someone who turned it on and off like a faucet to suit her own ends.

When I began my studies with Mrs. Lhevinne, she was well known, but I realized later that she was only at the beginning of her ascent on the personal ladder of success in the world of music. Her famous husband, the pianist Josef Lhevinne, had died suddenly in 1944. Besides the shock of losing her adored spouse, Rosina had had to adjust her style of living downward, drastically and abruptly. The Lhevinnes had evidently been extremely naïve in financial matters, and Rosina was left without a penny of life insurance because of Mr. Lhevinne's neglecting to pay the premiums. There were outstanding debts for the same reasons, and so she had to liquidate their quite extensive household in Kew Gardens, in New York, and find a small place to live. It was wartime and there was literally no room at the inn. Fortunately for Rosina, a former student, Lee Thompson, took her in to her closet-sized apartment at 185 Claremont Avenue and looked after her through the shattering first years of her widowhood and into her renaissance at the Juilliard in the late 1940s. Rosina was grateful to Lee for the rest of her life for that generous and kind action, and well she should have been.

The first item on my agenda was my initial lesson with Rosina. She asked me to come two days after that first Josef Lhevinne competition in which I had reached the finals and to bring the Prokofiev *Third Sonata* preparatory to playing it the following Friday night at her weekly master class. In general, the format for a master class is that three or four students perform as in a recital and then the master (the teacher) takes apart the performance, making it instantly and quite noticeably better because of his or her proffered suggestions. This is



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very much a "happening" and quite exciting for both student and teacher, since neither really knows in advance how it will come out—the first time is anybody's guess. Afterward, the teacher knows which student he can depend upon to carry out his ideas quickly and effectively in public. Not everyone is temperamentally suited to this. A stupendously gifted student may fall completely apart, unable to finish, whereas a previously less well regarded student takes fire and gallops through the experience to a glorious finish. That God-given ability to perform wonderfully under stress in public means *everything,* and you never can really know for sure who has it until that first time in front of an audience.

After playing the Prokofiev, Rosina smiled benignly and said warmly, "It will be wonderful!" I came in time to realize that this oft-repeated formula meant exactly what it said: it *will* be wonderful but it isn't *now.* Turning to the beginning she said, "Just a few things I show you." A few things! More like 1,001 things. I could never have dreamed there was so much in that piece, most of it supremely difficult to do as well as to understand. Between her heavy Russian accent and my heavy southern accent, Rosina and I were often at an impasse. The first instance of this occurred as she started to beseech me to "sink." Having no idea what she meant but coming from a generation that would never dream of saying "I don't understand you" to a teacher, I surmised that I was supposed to lower myself toward the keyboard. I obligingly sank toward the piano, but she kept bellowing, "No, no." It was only when she began to sing the melody in a dreadfully out-of-tune way that I realized that she was saying "sing" (with the hand, not the voice). Quickly adjusting my stance and touch, we went on, but soon the outcries of "sink!" again rent the air. I was nonplussed; we were in the middle of a very fast staccato passage but I tried valiantly to sing. Again, "No! no!" This time she took my hands off the keyboard and pointed to my head. "Sink" now appeared to mean "think." After a while I intuited what she wanted, and off we went. A third time came the dreaded "sink-sink." I tried my best to look cerebral but nearly fell off the bench as she suddenly leaned her entire upper body weight on my hands and arms. Finally, it seemed, "sink" really meant "sink."

I was at this point more than a little discouraged by our communication problems, but the worst was yet to come. Suddenly, Rosina started to instruct me on the proper way to pedal, and it was a revelation. Most American pianos have three pedals, but the middle pedal is not pertinent to this discussion. Besides, most European pianos have only the outside two pedals, the "soft" pedal on the left and the "damper" pedal on the right. These are easily recogniz-



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able as brass extension rods at the base of the piano in the center.

If one plays the piano only with the fingers—and no pedal—the only sustained sound possible is created by one or more fingers holding down one or more keys. Obviously, one cannot sustain low bass notes, for example, if the left hand has to jump up to the middle of the keyboard and play something else. Enter the damper pedal. That brass extension is connected to a whole set of "dampers" that are about one and a half inches long and whose bottom parts are made of felt and rest on the strings, thus dampening and cutting off the sound. But if the foot goes down (lifting the dampers off the strings), all the sound you are making is sustained until you lift your foot, bringing down the dampers and cutting off the old sound. At this point, you can either leave your foot up or put it down again, catching a new collection of sounds according to the needs of the music. If the timing is not right or the level of the pedal is wrong (there is from one to one and a half inches of play in most pedals), the result can be ghastly, muddy, atonal beyond belief. This action is called changing the pedal.

The first thing I must do, said Rosina, was pull my big toe under toward the instep as far as possible in order to set my foot in one piece from toe to ankle. Then I had to put the end of my big toe, now pointing toward the floor, on the end of the pedal. Her point was that without tension in the toes one could not control the speed of the pedal or feel the level exactly. She likened pedaling with a loose foot to playing with the palm of the hand rather than the fingers. The connection of sound brought about by changing pedal was only the most elementary in an extensive course she called "The Technique of the Toe." With this single bit of advice, she opened up to me a world of myriad marvelous sounds. But, then, Rosina was without a doubt one of the foremost teachers of pedal in the world.

But that day in L.A. I was rapidly becoming convinced that I was in the hands of a madwoman with leanings toward Chinese torture. Although I could certainly hear the difference pedaling with my by-now paralyzed foot, another communication gap loomed that brought me close to tears and despair. That bellowing started again with her totally incomprehensible admonition to "Listen to the new!" This continued at ever-increasing levels of decibels until I quavered, "The new? What is the *new*?" She calmed down at once and said, "Certainly the new harmonies." This meant that I must hold down the pedal until after playing the new harmony, release the pedal, listen like crazy until my ear heard the new harmony as completely clean, and *then* put the foot down. And so I learned that the ear is the master of the foot. My understanding of Rosina's heavily accented English gradually improved, and I spent the rest of the summer in a delirium of learning



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new pieces and new techniques. In September I went to New York to play my entrance exam at Juilliard in front of the entire piano faculty (consisting of such pianistic greats as Carl Friedburg, Ernest Hutcheson, James Friskin, Irwin Freundlich, and Beveridge Webster). Fortunately I passed, and I embarked on my first year at Juilliard with tremendous excitement. All my teachers seemed—in fact, were—wonderful.

Rosina discovered my ability to learn fast, and so she pushed me to my limits. Each week she assigned me a new Mozart concerto or Beethoven sonata, and the following week I would arrive with it memorized in its entirety. I thought everyone did this, and it was only later, when I became her assistant, that I discovered that probably only John Browning had gobbled up repertoire in similar fashion. Although Van Cliburn was certainly one of Rosina's pet students, he learned primarily by ear and by rote, so he covered much less music. Rosina's great strength as a teacher, for me, was that she kept demanding more and better, forcing me to listen to my playing ever more critically until I reached the point of thinking everything I did sounded lousy. This suited Rosina just fine, because she had heard Martha Graham speak somewhere on "the divine dissatisfaction one has in one's art." Rosina was—as the French say—*bouleversée* by this statement and immediately took the motto as her own. Anyone who had that coy axiom used against him in a lesson soon devoutly wished that Graham had stuck to her dancing and kept her mouth shut.

On December 14, 1949, I was introduced to the annual party given in remembrance of Mr. Lhevinne's birthday. There was a generous dinner, and it was a nice chance to see Rosina socially. It was, however, with no little shock that I found myself mid-sentence in the midst of a sepulchral silence that preceded, as it did every year, the playing of Mr. Lhevinne's recording of various show pieces made on the Welte piano rolls. It was indeed spectacular piano playing, but the artificiality of the concert led in future years to such irreverencies among Rosina's students as "I thought Mr. L. was not quite up to snuff tonight" or "The old boy was really in superb form this time!"

One of that year's more amusing happenings had to do with Felix Salmond, the great English cellist. An awesome chamber music teacher, he was a close friend of Rosina's (Mr. Salmond's mother had been a fine pianist, and so he was quite knowledgeable about the piano repertoire). One of the great sights in the music world was to see the two friends (he 6 feet 4 inches and walleyed, she 5 feet 2 inches and regal) walking together. As it was one of the most impressive honors at Jullliard to study chamber music with Mr. Salmond, a rule had been passed that no first-year student could be in his class.



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Rosina immediately set about trying to controvert that rule for me. She talked to him about it, but—there was "The Rule." Not at all daunted, she decided that she would snag him into hearing me—casually, of course ("There is always a way to get things done, dear"). So, having no idea why, my lesson time was abruptly changed from 11:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. Mr. Salmond often did not teach at 2:00 P.M. and it was his great pleasure to come on occasion and sit in on Rosina's 2:00 P.M. lesson, where he frequently put in his musical oar.

Terrifying stories about Mr. Salmond were part of Juilliard lore: "Why don't you throw that thing out the window and hold on to it?" he was supposed to have told a cello student. To a pianist he once said, "My dear girl, your talents are wasted on the piano. Why don't you go to Katherine Gibbs Secretarial School and be a star there?" One of Rosina's more intrepid students had the temerity to argue with Mr. Salmond. Afterwards the student was kept back for a minute and told: "Dear, if we are looking at a book and it looks red to you and red to me, if Mr. Salmond says it is black, then it is a black book."

Of course, the day came when the door swung open and in came the ogre himself to sit in on my lesson. After introductions, Rosina said, "Dear, play the mazurkas." A bell began to toll, and I knew damn well for whom that bell was tolling. "The mazurkas" referred to two mazurkas I had learned the preceding summer. The spirit of the mazurka is very hard to capture, and Rosina spent many hours with me trying to transmit its characteristics. Mazurkas, like waltzes, are written in 3/4 time. But the sound is very different from a waltz. Whereas a waltz has the first beat as the most important, in mazurkas the third beat is often almost equal to the first beat. As she explained it, the mazurka was basically a man's dance, and the third and first beats were often stomped from above the ground. There are also subtle shifts from the second and third beats. Rosina would dance around the room showing me the emphasis, and I was evidently so successful that she once looked at me quizzically and asked, "Are you sure you don't have any Polish blood?" These were the pieces that had so impressed the Juilliard jury, and they were also the pieces that I had neither touched nor thought about in the five months since the entrance exam. Hence the bell.

Absolutely petrified, I began to play. Within a few lines, strange guttural sounds began emanating from the couch. They continued and I thought—Oh lordy, he hates my playing—what new career is he planning for me? I almost stopped, thinking it pointless to continue, but training since starting to perform at the age of three demanded that, once having begun, I never stop. Heartsick, I finished and Mr. Salmond made the guttural sound again. Only after numerous repeti-



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tions did my despair change to soaring elation, for I realized he was saying "bravo." As it happened, my father died the next morning of a heart attack, and the lift I got from Mr. Salmond's approval helped sustain me in the difficult months ahead. Mr. Salmond had to quit most of his teaching the following year because of a heart attack, but I played for him many times, both solo and chamber music repertoire, and I was always grateful to Rosina for bringing this about.

Two years later she did another splendid thing for me when I was preparing to play the Concerto in F minor by Chopin with the Juilliard orchestra. She got Florence Paige Kimball, the teacher of Leontyne Price, to come to the theater and coach me for a good half hour on my stage presence. Although I felt like a fool marching on and off the stage, I learned a great deal that has been helpful to me all my life both as a pianist and as a teacher. We pianists are at best merely passable on stage; it takes a singer to know how to make the most of the space and the audience.

If Rosina really cared for you, she would constantly make constructive comments about your manners, your dress, your friends, and whatever else she could dredge up. Since her ideas about all these things were formed in Czarist Russia, it sometimes made life very difficult: for instance, anyone who lived with her was certain to be tricked out like a circus horse on those occasions when one went out in public. I'll never forget my intense embarrassment at a ball in Aspen in the late 1950s. Dress was not as unbuttoned as it would later become in Aspen; nevertheless, my appearance in a concert dress with tight bodice, spaghetti straps, and enormous tulle skirt caused a moment of absolute silence. Rosina took it for approbation, I as total shock that anyone would dream of dressing like that at a party in Aspen.

In 1955, Rosina asked me to come to L.A. to be her assistant for the summer. I soon discovered that one of my responsibilities was to help her organize Sunday outings for the students (swimming parties, picnics, and so forth). As anyone familiar with L. A. knows, you must have a car to get around. Thus I made the acquaintance of the burgeoning class of those she labeled *"les fidèles."* They were, I suppose, like classical music groupies. Someone asked me if the term referred to Rosina's best students. Quite the contrary. Being a *fidèle* usually meant taking Rosina on a Sunday trip into the country, and for this she would never dream of taking away the practice time of a good student. No, the *fidèles* were her former students, people hoping to become her students, parents of current students, all hoping to get something from Rosina. Rosina, however, felt that her presence was her tit for their tat and that she owed them nothing else.



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That summer I kept dragooning students with cars for Sunday service. One was a very nice unassuming young man who had to be pushed a little but finally said yes. One hour before leaving, he called to say he felt it would take up too much of his time. I immediately carried on about how disappointed Rosina and three students would be to lose their chance to go to the beach, and didn't he think a promise made like that shouldn't be broken at the last minute? He succumbed, and so John Williams, future composer of myriad blockbuster movie soundtracks (*Star Wars, Jaws, Close Encounters*, and others) and conductor of the Boston Pops, carted us all to the beach and back. He never took another lesson from me, although he continued his studies with Rosina!

Rosina and I first went to Aspen the summer of 1957. The housing boom had not yet started, and the committee had found for her a somewhat disreputable former rooming house, "The Silver Queen." There was a neon sign perched on a turret advertising the name of the place, and there were a few times that summer when a weary gentleman seeking companionship with the fairer sex would be totally nonplussed when, knocking and asking for "the Madame," he would come face-to-face with a completely unamused Mrs. Lhevinne. Although her entire demeanor inspired one with the desire to call her Madame, she considered it un-American and insisted on Mrs. Lhevinne as her proper title; indeed, she is the only person for whom I've ever seen a New York cabbie spring from his taxi, all but tugging his forelock at first sight of her. Even though she came to America in the 1920s, her accent was always that of a recent émigré. She had some quaint sayings. "Lo and behold!" became "Hold and below!" This had been exorcised from her vocabulary before I got there and she would chide her students for not correcting her English, but no one of course would. The charm and humor of her unintentional malaprops were too great. Nor was her less than perfect comprehension of English without its funny side. Occasionally, some of us might take Rosina to the theater in gratitude for lots of extra lesson time. This was harrowing in the extreme, as she incessantly would demand in loud heavily accented English to know "Why that funny?" and "What he mean?" The end result, inevitably, was that we ourselves were unable to keep up with the play!

She once told a young student who wanted desperately to get married but feared pregnancy that it was not a problem. A quick visit to the doctor for the fitting of a "diagram" would take care of it. On the other hand, a student who wanted a child was advised to put a pillow under her hips and remain quiet for thirty minutes after "it." Rosina absolutely preened herself when the blessed event occurred ten



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months later. She thoroughly appreciated earthy humor, and one of her most endearing qualities was her ability to let loose with peal after peal of laughter. In 1958 her house in Aspen—which another student and I shared with her—had the master bedroom upstairs with only a tiny room and powder room downstairs off the kitchen. Not being able to negotiate the stairs on a daily basis, she took the room off the kitchen. One night at 2:00 A.M. I heard a noise in the kitchen and went down to investigate. There was Mrs. Lhevinne, perched like a stork with one foot in the sink (a not inconsiderable feat for a seventy-nine-year-old woman) taking a sponge bath. She looked at me wryly and said, "I don't know why I bother when I'll just do it all over again at 9:00 A.M." I told her my mother's definition of a sponge bath, learned in medical school in the 1920s. "First you wash down as far as possible—then you wash up as far as possible—and then you wash possible!" I can still hear her hoots of merriment as she tried to memorize it—"and then you wash probable?" "No, dear, possible," I attempted to explain.

She referred often to the fathers of her most gifted students (the ones she had met) as pieces of furniture, and she wasn't talking about Hepplewhite. The most common phrase used in the countless imitations of her perpetrated by her students was "certainly you know." Upon a student complaining that at his preceding lesson she had told him to do exactly the opposite, she would unrepentantly say, "certainly you know, that was Monday and today is Friday"; or "certainly you know the sun was shining then and it rains today."

She could also be quite witty, usually at one's expense. In 1960 she performed the Mozart concerto K. 467 with the Juilliard orchestra to celebrate her eightieth birthday. My future husband (the late pianist and critic Samuel Lipman—whom I met when he came to study with Rosina in Aspen in 1959) wrote her speech for her, a speech filled with such beautiful sentiment that there was, literally, not a dry eye in the house. Sam stopped by her apartment before the concert to give her his best wishes and to suggest something new for the speech. As he stood outside her bedroom door starting to tell her of his inspiration, she said, "Just a minute, dear," whisked out of the bedroom wearing babushka and robe, and dragged him into a corner away from her dressers. "Certainly you know, dear," she hissed, "ghosts don't talk."

Another time her other assistant at Juilliard, Martin Canin, was visiting in Aspen, and the three of us were sitting in the kitchen chatting. This was after Van Cliburn's Russian triumph, and Rosina's fame as his teacher was at its zenith and people from all over the world were beseeching her for lessons. As she found it really difficult to turn away anyone talented, there were about thirty-five pupils in her



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Juilliard class. Mrs. Lhevinne taught about fifteen hours a week and Martin and I the other twenty. There were four or five students whom she taught exclusively, about five whom she saw every other week, and so on and so forth down the line until you got to the students who had twenty-six or twenty-seven lessons with the assistants and three or four with her. Since this was at a time when every self-respecting piano student felt that merely being in the same room with Rosina would further his or her career, you can well imagine that in those early years all the students presented themselves as students of Rosina Lhevinne with nary a hint of the names of Canin or Dowis (my maiden and professional name).

One day Rosina was regaling us with stories of the great success of this and that student (winning competitions and the like) and absolutely chuckling over the fact that she had seen some of them no more than twice during the year. "Of course they all said they were students of mine and didn't mention you two," she said happily. "That was always what happened to me with Mr. Lhevinne. I did all the teaching and he got all the credit. Now it is your turn." Martin and I were not charmed.

One of Rosina's more famous utterances had to do with practice habits. In an interview in some town where she and Mr. Lhevinne were giving a concert, she was asked how she spent the day of a concert. "After a little practice and a simple lunch I go to my room to rest and finger my passages." What she meant was that she would lie in the dark and think through the fingering (with the numbers) of difficult technical passages while moving the correct fingers in tandem with the thought--either on her stomach or on the bed. She was a great believer in mind over matter, and I can attest to this method of practice as being extremely productive. Once I was going to play the Chopin Sonata in b Minor the very next day and she made me change the fingering in a famously difficult double fourth passage. I pleaded that I couldn't change it so quickly. "Of course you can," she said in her way that brooked no interference. "We will take a walk." She made me say the fingering out loud non-stop (such as 5/2, 4/1, 3/1, 5/2, etc.) until I could spit it out like a machine gun. "We go back now," she said, and upon returning to the house she sent me straight to the piano to play the passage, and out it flowed like a waterfall. She also learned telephone numbers by making melodies of them: for instance, if you have the numbers 864-2116, it would come out in the key of C as CAFDCCA. (I myself came to use this method not only for telephone numbers but for charge card numbers, bank account numbers, etc.)

Rosina was not, however, generous with this kind of advice. Shortly



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after I began teaching for her, she said, "Dear, you must not tell the students so much. They get overwhelmed and upset." I replied that I did not demand more of them than of myself. Long silence. She said, "Certainly you must not judge others by yourself. In general you must save for the very few greatly gifted to tell them everything. The majority of the students simply cannot understand these fine details." Alas, I was never able to follow this rule, instead deluging my students with torrents of information because you can never really know how much anyone will understand. Or to put it another way—the bumble bee doesn't know that it isn't able to fly from an engineering standpoint and so it flies. That remains a key part of my teaching strategy—getting those bumble bees in the air and keeping them there.

On the other hand, Rosina did have, unlike most of the other teachers at Juilliard, a true sense of the art of teaching as a vocation, and she would sometimes accept someone who didn't play so well if he or she wanted to be a dedicated teacher. Once we were listening to tapes of students auditioning for Aspen. One was borderline pathetic in his barely acceptable rendering of a very simple piece. Much to my surprise she put the applicant, a teacher from a very small college in the deep South, on the accepted list. I was really surprised, but she said that we had to take him because he was a teacher, and think how terribly he must now be teaching his students.

She certainly did not mince words with her husband, much as she loved him. One day she told him something was coming between him and the piano. "What is that?" he asked innocently. "Your stomach," she chortled. Usually she was infinitely more devious in the way she tried to handle her family and others she cared for. It is said that Josef was quite the ladies' man (perhaps in an effort to get away from all those constructive comments). Rosina did not make a big deal of it unless it seemed really serious, but if she felt it was, she swung into action. News reached her of a San Francisco lady whom Josef visited as often as his schedule permitted. Upon the eve of his next transcontinental trip, she said: "Dear, I know that you are fond of Mrs. X— and I want to give you my blessing to see her as much as possible. As a matter of fact, go straight to see her right from the train—don't call—just surprise her." Josef departed, gaga with the thought of his wife's generosity, and when he got off the train (at 7:00 A.M.), he took a taxi directly to the house of his love. He rang and rang. Finally, the door was opened by a frumpy-looking woman with curlers in her hair, cold cream on her face, and a drooping figure. It took a moment for Josef to realize that this apparition was the woman he thought he loved, and then he ran screaming down the avenue never to see Mrs. X— again: This was, of course, precisely the outcome that Rosina had hoped for.



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The true story of the Lhevinnes' marriage was difficult to know. There is a famous anecdote about an interview after one of their concerts. The press was asking Rosina to what she attributed the success of their marriage. As she was formulating a suitably charming reply, Josef burst out of the other dressing room and shouted, "Fights, fights, fights!" Certainly, she made it quite clear that she had put her own playing second to his, always. This was done with the most unselfish feelings on her part, but I did wonder sometimes. It is a fact that she was one of the great stars at the Moscow Conservatory—graduating at fifteen with the coveted gold medal given rarely to anyone and especially not to such a young woman. I know from their contemporaries that in their first two years of marriage the Lhevinnes were threatened with eviction several times because she practiced all night. I know that when I told her I was going to marry Samuel Lipman she called him immediately, saying that we must not marry because I was too good a pianist to be a wife.

In the 1950s Rosina started to play again, at first only chamber music such as the Mozart Piano Quartet in G Minor and the Dvořák Piano Quintet in A Major. As she began her ninth decade, she was invited to play a concerto with the orchestra at the Aspen Music Festival, and she chose to play a Mozart concerto that was new to her. She did this for several years, and she brought back the Concerto in E Minor by Chopin (which had been "her" piece since childhood). Her courage was all the more remarkable, considering that she had had one mastectomy in 1949 and would have another in 1963. Rosina's courage inspired me—and, no doubt, many others—to perform a solo piano recital (by memory) after more than twenty years of playing only chamber music with the music before me.

Rosina had always been careful about her health in a sort of European fashion and became even more so at the advent of all this playing. She thought that night air brought with it a contagion of evils and kept her apartment and studio so sealed up and hot that many times, during a class, she had to leave the room while we opened the windows and aired out the place. It was not at all unusual during near-zero weather for every member of the class to depart sodden with perspiration. How she would have ridiculed the current preoccupation with killing yourself at a health club to gain more energy! Several months before a performance she would announce to the class as a whole: "I will be playing in two or three months, and until then I want you all to look upon me as a bank—you make as many deposits as you can and I will withdraw what I need." Since that meant that many of the students would only be seeing her assistants until after the concert, I somehow doubt how keen they must have been to make those deposits.



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Then we would move into the really serious phase of protecting Rosina's health. She had an almost morbid fear of colds, having had severe bronchitis as a child, so she would not allow *anyone* with a cold within forty feet of her. Once, when she had a cold, I explained that it was perfectly all right for her to see me because I myself had a cold, and she said, "Oh no, dear—not at *all.* There are Heinz 57 varieties of germs, so how can I know if we have the same ones?" All the students soon learned the ruse, if they hadn't practiced enough, of calling to say—hacking discreetly—that they had a cold; Rosina could be counted on to postpone the lesson quick as a flash. Once, Harriet Wingreen, one of her best students, literally begged for a lesson in spite of her cold because she had an important concert to play, but Rosina was adamant. A few weeks later Harriet stopped by with an arm in a cast to explain that she had fallen, broken a finger, and therefore would not be seeing Rosina for a few weeks. Oh no, said Rosina as she handed Harriet a list of four or five pieces written for left hand alone—you go right now to get this music, and I will expect to hear some of it next week.

Rosina's sovereign cure for colds was a product then used, I believe, a great deal by athletes but applied rather differently by her. Ben Gay—the well-known liniment for sore muscles—Rosina stuffed up her nose. She believed with the fervor of a just-converted born-again Christian that Ben Gay and *only* Ben Gay, if applied frequently enough, would clear her nasal passages and keep them open. We tried to tell her that she had probably burnt out the lining of her nasal passages years before, thus leaving the area open to colonization by every kind of passing germ. Her response was to double the dose.

Once in a hotel in Denver, Rosina did have occasion to doubt her use of Ben Gay. Fiorella Miotto (later to be Mrs. Martin Canin) was a student whose job was to be Rosina's companion, to pack up all her things in Aspen and get her to the hotel in Denver, whence Rosina would depart the next morning for California. Around midnight Rosina sleepily asked Fiorella not to turn on the light, but just to reach in her cosmetic bag and hand her the Ben Gay. "What have you done to me—turn on the light!" Rosina suddenly cried out, at the same time as the appalling odor of spoiled fish reached Fiorella. With the light on, it was discovered that the remnants of a tube of anchovy paste, left over from a party long before, were now up Rosina's nose and she was screaming "Get this off me." In her frantic haste to get rid of it, Rosina smeared the anchovies not only on the sheets but on the wallpaper; and though Fiorella got Rosina cleaned up, she couldn't manage the rest. The remainder of the night (since Rosina wouldn't let the window be opened) they had to try to sleep in the midst of a smell that



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I gather made the Fulton Fish market seem like Chanel No. 5.

In 1961 Rosina called to tell me that Leonard Bernstein had invited her to play the Chopin Concerto in E Minor the following season with the New York Philharmonic. I showed my great excitement. She said that I was one of the very few people she could tell good news to, that lots of people are happy to commiserate with your bad news, but very few were made happy by your good news. Then she said one of the saddest things I've ever heard, "Why didn't they ask me twenty years ago?" And so, two months before her eighty-third birthday, Rosina made her debut with the New York Philharmonic. On January 19, 1963, Harold Schonberg wrote in the *New York Times*:

> History of a sort was made at Thursday night's New York Philharmonic Concert when Rosina Lhevinne played Chopin's E minor piano concerto. She is 82 years old and certainly no woman has ever accomplished an equal feat.
>
> Mme. Lhevinne . . . proceeded to give a lovely performance of the Chopin. It was anything but a lavender-and-old-lace interpretation. Indeed, it actually had moments of force—not naturally, the roaring force of a young virtuoso, but a controlled force in which a forte could sound mighty loud.
>
> . . . She produced a warm and vital sound, one that had no trouble carrying anywhere in the house.
>
> And technically she was a marvel. Using a flat and quiet hand position she played this difficult music with ease. Indeed, the harder it got, the easier she made it sound. In the coda of the first movement she ripped out those little left-hand trills like an enthusiastic child. And the unisons ending the concerto were as fleet and accurate as those of any virtuoso generations her junior.
>
> One could mention many other things, a perfect legato, a spacious and unharried view of the music and a delicate sense of poetry.
>
> She won cheers and a standing ovation and she deserved them.

Yet for all such fulsome praise for her playing, Rosina failed singularly to be adequately recognized for the achievements of perhaps her most famous student, Van Cliburn. I would like to touch on Van Cliburn's triumph in Moscow, when he won the Tchaikovsky competition in 1958 at the age of twenty-four because with his recent reentrance into the limelight I notice a glaring omission in all of his publicity—that of proper credit given to Rosina Lhevinne as his teacher. Van seems to have decided after the fact that his only real teacher was his mother, Rildia Bee, a former student of Arthur Friedheim. Certainly she was otherwise his only teacher, but without Rosina's devoted help, Van would never have won that Moscow competition.

Let me go back a little. I have known Van (both of us are Texans) since the time when I was taller than he—as adults, I am 5 feet 7



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inches and he is 6 feet 4 inches—and his playing at a young age showed both immense flare and a rather sloppy approach. In 1951, Van appeared at Juilliard and announced to Rosina, "Ah've come to study with ya'll, honey." The entrance exams for the year were past, but I and a friend, James Mathis, told her she had to hear him. Once she heard him, the rest, as they say, is history. She not only took him on as a student, she loved him—his tremendous esprit, his emotional approach to everything, his combined naïveté and swashbuckling manner.

At Juilliard there are numerous competitions every year to play with the orchestra. There are several piano concerti, violin concerti, and other works dispersed among the celli, violas, and woodwinds. A rule had been established that each teacher had to stage a mini-competition to choose a maximum of two entrants to the big competition. This rule was in reality made chiefly for Rosina, because only she ever had enough good students to be able to enter four or five. The year the Tchaikovsky was announced, it was a foregone conclusion that Van would win but, nevertheless, we had to have the mini-competition because there were four other students ready to play.

The two winners were Van and a man named Koe Sun Lee. Although I appreciated the outstanding qualities in Van's playing, I was not what one might call an all-out fan. His playing struck me as without finesse and real depth, bordering (dare I say it) on the cheap thrills side. Koe Sun's playing, though lacking technical freedom, really moved me deeply, for it projected great passion and poetry. After the class Rosina asked my opinion, clearly expecting me to rave about Van. I raved instead about Koe Sun. This was a big mistake (as I learned from all my classmates), making Rosina so angry that she would not speak to me for five days. She finally relented the following weekend at a party when she saw that Van and I were on friendly terms as usual. I was pretty annoyed myself, since I was not in fact betraying Van, whatever she might have thought; I just felt that there were some wonderful things in Koe Sun's performance that should not be ignored in the rush to jump on the Van wagon.

The fall before the Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow, Rosina had the idea that Van ought to enter—that he had the right personality and talent to woo the Russians, and, if he did win, he could resuscitate his dying career. None of us could dream of the staggering success that he would have. In order to bring this about, Rosina gave up her Sundays—usually devoted to rest and trips to the country—entirely to Van. The repertoire requirements for the competition were immense, and she spent three to five hours working with him every week.

In March 1958 Rosina invited me to come hear Van play all his



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pieces just before leaving for Moscow. He played simply magnificently. Every piece, every style was perfect—the timing, the balance, the tone, the technique—all unbelievable. I was entirely, albeit initially unwillingly, seduced by his playing, and it seemed impossible that anyone could have beaten him—and of course no one did. But he never could have reached that peak without Rosina, and in my opinion, he reached a peak in Moscow from which he inexorably and slowly started to descend not long after. Unfortunately, he never took another lesson with Rosina, which was sad for him, because it seems to me that only she had the ability to bring out the best in him.

It is perfectly true, however, that only Van of all the young pianists at that time could have made such a success out of his Moscow triumph. His unflappable self-confidence, his bigger-than-life manner, his eagerness to embrace fame and the adulation of the multitudes where another might have been overwhelmed—these were the qualities that helped to bring about and to cement his success. But it was Rosina Lhevinne who sculpted the musical performance that won that Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow. Years later she told me that she couldn't understand why he had never made any attempt to pay her something for all the free time she had given him, his Moscow triumph having made Van a very wealthy man. Although sympathizing with her feelings, I pointed out that if Moscow had instantaneously made Van the world's most famous pianist, it had coincidentally made her the world's most famous piano teacher, and so she could presumably write her own ticket.

From the moment that Sam Lipman and I became close in 1960, my relationship with Rosina lost some of its intensity. Sam only worked with her for a couple of years. They fought all the time, and I was often caught in the middle. (My first date with Sam was cut short by a huge fight about how to interpret the Beethoven Sonata Op. 110 in A Flat.) Sam's whole attitude toward music was much more structured than Rosina's and stemmed from the German tradition of music-making rather than from the Russian. He deeply distrusted her efforts to make a greatly polished pianist out of him (read slick for polished). One time, after Sviatoslav Richter first played in New York, Rosina asked Sam for his opinion. Never loathe to say what he thought, he made it clear that he didn't like it very much. Rosina was terrifyingly quiet for a minute, and then, in her deadest voice, she said, "I only wish for you the same success."

The battles between Sam and Rosina were perfect bouts of one-upmanship. Rosina pointed to a place in the Tchaikovsky Concerto in B flat minor one day that is marked staccato (short) and always played staccato. She said he should hold the pedal through it. When Sam



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remonstrated with her, citing the marking and general performance practice, she smiled her little cat smile as though to say "At last I've got him," then said sweetly, "But Tchaikovsky told Mr. Lhevinne to pedal there." Even Sam could not manage to top that.

At about this time Rosina took to having great dollops of Russian caviar every night with her dinner. She never felt she had to offer any to anyone else present, going so far as to say, "I know caviar doesn't interest you." Caviar was not terribly expensive then, so it became a good present to give her on her birthday. She went too far on one birthday when Sam took her some caviar and she said with a lordly wave, "Put it with the others in the kitchen." Rightly incensed by this cavalier behavior, Sam left, putting it in his pocket, instead, for us to enjoy tremendously later.

In those days the class was so large that often in May there would be four or five (master) classes a week in order for every single person to be able to perform his pieces before the dread final exams, the results of which determined, among other things, the amount of a student's scholarship. Rosina was always very active in these classes, especially when she got to denounce someone, usually the student, but sometimes the assistant. Students have often said that if you could get through your pieces successfully in Room 412 at Juilliard, it was a snap anywhere else. Just one look at Rosina could scare you to death; she hated having to give all those classes, and she often looked so mean and vicious that a fainthearted student was in danger of being stopped cold in his tracks. You could always turn her around with a really superlative performance, but those were not often forthcoming on those May nights. We all knew that when she looked fierce, or when she said "What my pleasure today," you had to play five to six times better than usual or you might not survive. The atmosphere was not improved by twenty-five to thirty-five pianists sitting a few feet away waiting to delight in your every mistake.

In music there are places of technical difficulty analogous to ice-skaters' triple jumps, and, believe me, a close tally of serious falls was scrupulously kept. But, as in ice-skating, the jumps were only part of it, and to receive plaudits from anyone, you had also to play with imagination, daring, and lyricism. Rosina hated above all else a harsh sound (even when it might have benefited the music), and if someone played with a hard loud tone, she would shriek at the top of her voice, "Nails in the wall, nails in the wall." A shimmer of apprehension would zip around the room as every person present would wonder if he was also slated for the same crushing criticism.

Sometimes astonishing things surfaced in those classes, such as the night that Rosina sighed, "Listen to the dissonances" after a perfor-



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mance of Brahms. This sounds a little strange until you remember that in her youth Rosina heard Brahms's music straight from his pen, so to speak, and for her it was modern music. Another time someone played a little-known and excruciatingly boring piece by Chopin. Afterward there was total silence (the students in class took their cue from Rosina, and, being cowards, if she didn't clap, neither did they). Finally, she turned to me and said, "You know, dear, there is always a reason why these pieces are never played." That was true; music becomes trite because it is overplayed, and it is overplayed because it is beautiful, not ugly and uninteresting, though none of this can have been much consolation for the poor student.

Rosina's ideas about Bach were always on the literal and unadorned side, so she became rather nervous when presented with an idiomatic and fully developed conception of the music that Sam gave one evening of a wonderful Bach Prelude and Fugue. After he finished, she waited—obviously trying to decide how she might influence his conception by making it more romantic. Finally she said, looking around at the class, "I think the mood here—somber, don't you?" Immediately there ricocheted around the room, from student to student, "somber—somber—somber," ending with the class nerd, who pontificated while clasping his hands (and clearly trying to make brownie points with Rosina), "Yes, I think—somber."

One night we were treated to a performance of the *Waldstein Sonata* op. 53 in C major—one of Beethoven's greatest works—by one of Rosina's students. This piece requires great art to project because the plethora of C major scales, arpeggios, and chords makes a boring interpretation hard to avoid. Alas, art was elsewhere that evening and the result was identical to being forced to listen to someone practice his Czerny exercises mechanically for a half hour. We were all in a state of paralyzed and exhausted boredom when Sam leaned over and said, "Long Day's Czerny into Night."

For all her aggressive behavior, Rosina had a timorous streak in her personality. She was actually afraid to put herself forward to the point where she would be responsible publicly for her opinions. Everyone was surprised and even shocked to find that Rosina had only a very bad and unresponsive Baldwin piano in her apartment to work and teach upon (she usually taught at Juilliard, but would occasionally give a lesson at home). Almost all serious and respected pianists in those days were Steinway artists, meaning that they practiced, taught, and performed on Steinways exclusively. She and Josef Lhevinne, though originally Steinway artists, had been wooed over to Baldwin's because of significant financial incentives, but there certainly weren't any of those left by 1949. It took her six years of constant badgering by her



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students and friends to reach the point when, in October 1955, she called the matriarch of the Steinway family and said, "Darling, I'm back." What made this even more strange was that, in the early 1950s, there were several of us who were steamrolling the competition in every contest we entered, so her teaching reputation was at an all-time high.

Later, after Rosina became internationally known, she still wouldn't write her own ticket. She wasn't greedy about money, but close with the money she had. She would never, for instance, gouge a student for money, and she never raised her prices up to what many others were beginning to charge. I think she really did not realize how famous she was. The rush to study with her (after Van's triumph) was born not just from the desire to learn to play better but from the belief that Rosina could create careers by contacting the proper manager or conductor. Olga Samaroff, the great pianist and teacher (of William Kapell, among others), had, for instance, included in her divorce settlement with Leopold Stokowski the demand that he had to engage any pianist she wished to play with him, however many times she decreed. Now there was a career maker.

A far greater reason for Rosina's unwillingness to call managers and conductors on behalf of her students was her desire to keep the balance of power always in her favor. No matter what her own (usually strong) opinions were, she wanted to control people more than anyone I've ever known, and she felt that if she went out on a limb for one person, she might lose the loyalty of several others. Rosina lived by the rule of divide and conquer. She was forever telling one student wonderful things about another (with the implication that the sun doesn't shine in two places) and then reversing the statement (privately, of course) to the other student later.

We would all be very hurt when, after one of our performances, a gushing admirer would say to her, "Aren't you proud of Van? Or Jeaneane? or John (Browning)?" And Rosina would reply, "Certainly, you know, I never proud. The word proud not in my vocabulary." She confused pride with boasting, but that didn't help the luckless student, standing there feeling denied. Once, working on the Chopin B Minor Sonata with me, she declared, "Oh, if only there could be a performance with your musicality and Van's fingers," thus slighting us both. She would also cut the ground right out from under you without a moment's hesitation. One night she raved on and on about a truly spectacular performance that Sam gave of the Prokofiev Concerto no. 3 in class. On her way home, someone of forceful attitude said he didn't like it, so the next morning Sam was awakened by Rosina at 7:00 A.M. to be told, in an ice-cold voice, how terribly he played.



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This continual undermining of everyone—especially those closest to her—was probably the main reason why Rosina spent her last years virtually alone. I left her and Juilliard in 1968. I was getting no credit or appreciation from her and precious little money, and because I had no time, I had to turn down many pianists who wanted to work with me privately. I did not handle it well or graciously. Had she ever been able to be generous with herself on a consistent basis, she would have had not only me but many others looking out for her to the end of her life. Even her relations with her son and daughter were, to put it gently, rocky.

Rosina Lhevinne died in California in her mid-nineties, passing on almost unnoticed by the music world. She had been one of the great teachers of her time.



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# Welcome to Post-Culturalism

CHRISTOPHER CLAUSEN

WRITING RECENTLY in the *New Republic* about the Internet, Gary Chapman described its adepts as "the intellectual vanguard for an internationalist, libertarian world-view of global, amoral, stateless capitalism" and contrasted this vision with "the nativist, patriotic 'family values' apparently ascendant in the American middle class." Chapman, director of the 21st Century Project at the University of Texas, believes that the increasing use of computer networks has greatly strengthened the first of these outlooks and weakened the "parochialism" of which the second is a rationalization. Politicians, he maintains, have failed to grasp either the "culture" of the Internet or its implications for the politics they practice.

Apart from pointing out the difficulty of regulating cyberspace, Chapman has little to say about what those implications might be. Readers who are not "digerati" may suspect that, like other enthusiasts, he exaggerates the importance of computers on the way most people think or behave. He has, however, neatly encapsulated two frames of mind (neither quite systematic enough to be called an ideology) that increasingly dominate political and cultural controversy, not only in the United States but in much of the world. On one side are libertarians, free traders, optimistic space travelers through the modern world whose lifeblood is "information" in the various senses of that protean buzzword. On the other are neo-isolationists, nationalists, advocates of restricting trade and immigration, religious believers who demand that the state use its power to enforce traditional prohibitions against illegitimacy, abortion, and many forms of incivility. As has often been pointed out, Muslim fundamentalism offers a counterpart to the latter set of positions in much of the non-Western world.

My concern here is not with political controversy as such but with the unfolding cultural history that it dimly reflects. The relationship between cultural change and its expression in politics (whether elec-

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toral or academic) is not always what one would expect. For example, a libertarian, internationalist vision of the world ought in theory to be just what the doctors of diversity and multiculturalism ordered. On the Internet or in a world of permeable borders, different cultures should flourish side by side in relationships unmarked by either dominance or submission. In practice, however, such an environment rapidly breaks down not merely boundaries but cultures themselves. This process began long before computers were invented, and, whether we label it modernity, cultural imperialism, the technological revolution, or the inexorable logic of capitalism, no culture is immune to it. The result is a United States—and increasingly an entire world—fast approaching a condition that can best be described not as multicultural but as post-cultural.

Notice that Chapman referred to the "culture" engendered by the Internet. The word *culture*, when used anthropologically rather than honorifically, refers to the total way of life of a discrete society, its traditions, habits, beliefs, and art—"the systematic body of learned behavior which is transmitted from parents to children," as Margaret Mead summarized it in 1959. For a traditional culture, Ruth Benedict pointed out in her immensely influential *Patterns of Culture* (1934), "outside of the closed group there are no human beings." The culture of Inca Peru or of Anglo-Saxon England varied over time but had certain constant features, including a language, that differentiated it from other cultures in other times or places. A culture is defined by those differences and exclusions.

The "culture" of the Internet is another story altogether and requires a different kind of telling. Used metaphorically, *culture* is everywhere these days. The latest edition of *Books in Print* contains three and one-half columns, in minuscule type, of titles such as *The Culture of Addiction, The Culture of Biomedicine, The Culture of Childhood, . . . of Complaint, . . . Disbelief, . . . Protest, . . . Science, . . . the University*, and *The Culture of War*. A *New York Times* story last year about a company that makes preppy clothes for a black clientele paraphrases the owner, Charles Walker, Jr., to the effect that Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger "didn't make clothes that reflected blacks' lifestyles or culture," and adds that Walker's new line of gear "allows the wearer both to dress in preppy style and to express cultural pride." Around the same time, the news from South Africa included a controversy about whether Zulus should be allowed to carry such "cultural weapons" as spears and machetes in political demonstrations. Today the press is full of stories about the "culture" of the Defense Department, the Central Intelligence Agency (John Deutch, the new director, is trying to change it), Congress (Speaker Newt Gingrich is said to have already



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changed it), and any large corporation that happens to be in the news. *GQ* even describes opera as being characterized by "the culture of booing." Has the word *culture* acquired the same cultural status as a cough?

Yes and no. Clearly, most of the time *culture* is a lazy, trendy substitute for a more specific word. Sometimes the writer really means common attitudes, sometimes fashion, sometimes behavior. The concept of culture carries with it, however, two serious implications in most contemporary usage. First, whatever is cultural is presumed not to be biologically determined, despite the frequent sloppy equation of culture with race. Cultural determinism, together with its corollary cultural relativism, is an entrenched academic dogma in the humanities and social sciences, popularized though not invented by such widely read anthropologists as Mead and Benedict. "By the time [a child] can talk," the latter declared memorably, "he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities."

William Connolly reflected this implication of the word, though with a curiously flexible notion of determinism, when he complained in the *New York Times Book Review* about "the cultural demand for heterosexuality." If heterosexuality is only a "cultural demand," not a matter of biology, its normative status ranks as a mere prejudice and can be changed, as Connolly obviously thinks it ought to be. Culture has become a familiar whipping boy, particularly where sex is involved. "I'm no longer willing to call it an illness, the kind of promiscuity I engaged in between 1960 and 1970," Jeffrey Masson recently told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "But it was probably cultural."

On the other hand, "culture" can equally be an excuse, a rhetorical device to place some taste or practice beyond criticism. "The principle of cultural relativism," the eminent anthropologist Alfred Kroeber wrote in 1952, "has long been standard anthropological doctrine. It holds that any cultural phenomenon must be understood and evaluated in terms of the culture of which it forms part." The Zulus of South Africa feel that their "cultural weapons" should be exempt from bans that apply to other weapons; otherwise their culture is being discriminated against. (Some residents of the American West make the same argument about their favorite firearms but get little sympathy from the news media.) *Cultural* is not being used here with the implication that carrying spears, like demanding heterosexuality, is a vestige of less enlightened times and should be discontinued. Quite the opposite. To deprive Zulus of their spears is to attack their culture. And to attack a culture these days will sooner or later inspire a charge of genocide, another growth stock on the lexical market.



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Describing something as the product of culture can therefore imply either of two contradictory things about it: that it is not genetically fixed and can (usually should) be changed, or that it exists in an autonomous realm that, because of the doctrine of cultural relativism, is immune to criticism from outside. In contemporary polemics, what the American Indian activist Russell Means castigates as "Eurocentric male culture" is often attacked from the first perspective (as a collection of prejudices to be overcome), while non-Western or minority "culture" is often defended from the second (as a precious inheritance that should be beyond criticism). At the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, China, Iraq, and other Asian dictatorships invoked cultural relativism to contend that Western complaints about their human-rights abuses represented a form of imperialism. Forcibly suppressing dissenters, the argument went, may violate European and American norms, but the ancient cultures of the East have the right to follow their own customs. In some versions of this defense by the Chinese and Singaporean governments, the modern police state becomes an expression of traditional Confucian morality. Besides the fact that this whole line of argument depends on Western anthropology for its underpinnings, it grossly libels the very cultures it ostensibly defends by implying that individual rights have no place in them.

The claim that every "culture" and all of its expressions should be equally respected is too sentimental for anyone to follow consistently, though it gets a lot of play in the abstract. Even Kroeber felt that his anthropological colleagues were insufficiently attentive to the possibility of "fixed, pan-human, if not absolute, values." What cultural relativism often means in practice today is that only those aspects of non-European cultures that seem compatible with Western feminism and some notion of human rights are held up as examples of diversity. Few American multiculturalists are enthusiastic about the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia (the fact that they aren't allowed to drive cars led to outrage in the media during the Gulf War), while female circumcision in parts of sub-Saharan Africa has lately illuminated another boundary of cultural relativism in the West. Similar criticisms of traditional practices were made by many speakers at the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women held in China. The multiculturalism festivals held in many American towns and universities are sometimes reduced, like movie travelogues of the 1940s, to celebrating little more than the traditional foods and costumes that Third World peoples haul out on special occasions. Meanwhile the "cultural diversity" practiced in university hiring and admissions has almost nothing to do with culture but offers a justification, in academically familiar lan-



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guage, for affirmative-action categories that are really based on physical characteristics or ancestry.

What these contradictory uses of *culture* suggest is that the objects the word used to identify, which were always more fluid and slippery than many anthropologists liked to admit, are now close to moribund. A culture capable of determining its members' thoughts and behavior to the extent that Ruth Benedict, for example, asserts can do so only by keeping them isolated from countervailing influences. Cultures in that isolated sense, however, have been growing rarer for several centuries. When real cultural conflict erupts today, as in Lebanon or the former Yugoslavia, the spectacle is so atavistic and unexpected that the rest of the world is reduced to impotent horror.

The doctrines of cultural relativism and determinism derived from anthropologists' study of tiny, exceptional groups, mostly living on islands in the farther reaches of the Pacific, on Indian reservations in western North America, or in remote parts of Africa. Those cultures were fast losing their distinctness even as they were being studied. The steamship, the telegraph, and the newspaper had already gone a long way toward breaking down cultural separation in most of the world fifty years before the jet plane and nearly a century before the Internet. The result was the first stage of post-culturalism, in which technology begins the long process of displacing custom. The spears of the Zulu can be described as "cultural weapons" precisely because they represent quaint survivals from a vanished way of life. If they could be used effectively as weapons in modern warfare, nobody would call them cultural.

In contrast to the now-fading traditional life of the Zulu, the "culture" of the Internet has none of the characteristics of a real culture. It is not a total way of life; it did not evolve among a distinct people; nobody inherited it or was raised in it; it makes no moral demands and produces no art. The same is true, in slightly different ways, of the "culture" of the CIA, the press, or General Motors. The word has come to be used so loosely because those who use it have no organic relationship to a real inherited culture and no clear conception of what such a relationship would be like. Apart from WASPs and the children of immigrants, hardly any Americans grow up knowing their ancestral languages. Intermarriage has given most Americans multiple ancestral languages. Except on the most superficial level, few Americans inherit traditions that are distinct from the ones that other Americans of different ethnic backgrounds inherit equally. One result is what Michael Ignatieff aptly calls "the narcissism of minor differences." Many black Americans exaggerate and sentimentalize their



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connections to a homeland across the sea—Kwanza, after all, was invented in Los Angeles—but Italian-Americans and Irish-Americans do exactly the same thing. More significantly, in an era when identity is more fluid and elusive than ever before, everyone at a given level of affluence has access to the products (electronic and otherwise) that now help to define it from moment to moment.

Put in its simplest terms, the ideal of multiculturalism is the laudable one that people from drastically different backgrounds should live together in harmony and respect for each other's cultural heritages. Some multiculturalists go further and equate the sacredness of life with the sacredness of culture. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited by Amy Gutmann (Princeton University Press, 1994), the ecologist Steven Rockefeller expresses this concept at its most grandiose:

> It may be argued that human cultures are themselves like life forms. They are the products of natural evolutionary processes of organic growth. Each, in its own distinct fashion, reveals the way the creative energy of the universe, working through human nature in interaction with a distinct environment, has come to a unique focus. Each has its own place in the larger scheme of things, and each possesses intrinsic value quite apart from whatever value its traditions may have for other cultures.

Problems arise, however, when one examines the assumptions underlying this formulation. First, what is it that one is respecting when one respects the "intrinsic value" of another culture? Something different from one's own inheritance, or an echo of something already familiar? If, like many young people in the 1960s, I find Buddhism admirable because of its emphases on peace and equality, am I embracing something genuinely "other" (a favorite word of multiculturalists) or merely finding confirmation for ideals I already hold? Or is the point of consistent multiculturalism, as Rockefeller implies, to honor those aspects of other cultures that really are "other," such as caste in traditional Hinduism, *Bushido* in pre-1945 Japan?

The deeper question has to do with what features of a culture survive in the kind of society that is described as multicultural. If cultures are like life forms, they must eventually grow old and die, but few advocates of multiculturalism take this possibility into account. On the contrary, the philosopher Susan Wolf describes some of the joys of the new dispensation:

> Every time I go to the library with my children, I am presented with an illustration of how generations past have failed to recognize the degree to which our community is multicultural, and of how the politics of recognition



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can lead, and indeed is leading, to a kind of social progress. My children tend to gravitate toward the section with folk stories and fairy tales. They love many of the same stories that I loved as a child—Rapunzel, the Frog Prince, the Musicians of Bremen—but their favorites also include tales from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America that were unavailable to me when I was growing up. . . . [B]y having these books and by reading them, we come to recognize ourselves as a multicultural community, and so to recognize and respect the members of that community in all our diversity.

It goes without saying that the books Professor Wolf has in mind are all in English, all published in England or North America, all written for an audience of English-speaking children. The "culture" that produced these books for its own purposes is Western. As in the stereotypical economy of imperialism, only the raw materials come from Africa, Asia, or another poor region of the globe—fossil souvenirs, at least in the American context, rather than expressions of profound cultural variation.

In the same book, Charles Taylor discusses a minority culture in North America that is determined to survive in a more robust sense: French Canada. Whether the government of Quebec can be counted as multicultural, however, is open to doubt.

For instance, Quebec has passed a number of laws in the field of language. One regulates who can send their children to English-language schools (not francophones or immigrants); another requires that businesses with more than fifty employees be run in French; a third outlaws commercial signage in any language other than French. In other words, restrictions have been placed on Quebeckers by their government, in the name of their collective goal of survival, which in other Canadian communities might easily be disallowed by virtue of the Charter [the Canadian equivalent of the Bill of Rights].

The premise of such legislation is obvious: that without these protections, the French language and the culture it embodies would continue to die out as French-speaking Canadians join the more numerous and prosperous Anglophone civilization on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel. Harmony and mutual respect are seen as a recipe for assimilation; to survive even in its stronghold, French requires exclusivity enforced by law. Whatever one thinks of the Quebec government's policies, this analysis is probably correct.

Even these laws to safeguard their language are not enough for many French-Canadians, who seek nothing less than an independent state. When a referendum on Quebec sovereignty narrowly lost in October 1995, the province's premier blamed the result on outside money and the "ethnic vote"—a notorious expression of the xenopho-



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bia that is probably inseparable from any vigorous effort to preserve much more of a culture than its food and folk tales.

For all but a tiny proportion of the North American population—Vietnamese or Cuban immigrant families in certain enclaves, religious minorities such as the Old Order Amish or the Lubavitchers, French Canadians in rural districts—the connection with an ancestral culture is now so vestigial that whether to assert or ignore it has become entirely a matter of choice. Taco salad, pizza, stir fry, or a Big Mac? Take your pick. The universal familiarity of these dishes indicates not that many cultures flourish here but that innocuous morsels of each are now part of something else, something which is often called American culture—dynamic, inclusive, a melting pot despite the recent unpopularity of that term—but which is not a culture at all in the traditional sense of the word. If it were, it would exclude more, and at the same time take more for granted. In a living culture neither E. D. Hirsch nor anyone else would write a book called *Cultural Literacy*, which tries to teach people things they would already know if they were part of such an organism.

*E pluribus unum*, the motto of the United States, means "Out of many one," but the one is a wholly different kind of entity from the many, especially since the melting pot became a microwave. This post-cultural quality of American life was pre-visioned as long ago as the eighteenth century, when universalism was a widely shared ideal and Enlightenment thinkers dismissed any local forces that stood in their way as mere provinciality. If all men are created equal, with certain unalienable rights, and Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, and the golden door remains more or less open, there is not much chance for any culture to preserve its unique qualities by repelling outside influences. Apart from the survival (more or less) of the English language, this loss of distinctiveness applies just as much to the WASP-derived American culture of the nineteenth century as to more recent immigrant cultures from outside Europe. In contrast to societies of the pre-industrial past, the contemporary United States has neither one big culture nor a number of smaller ones—only a strange mixture of freedom and nostalgia.

The American political tradition places individual liberty ahead of nearly every other goal, thereby (among many other benefits) reducing occasions for intergroup conflict. The libertarian universalism that Gary Chapman describes is one of the permanent trends in American life and comes closer to realization with every advance in communications. But the freedom that lies beyond culture may be a mixed blessing—in some respects a liberty that not even John Stuart Mill could



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love. The escape from restraint that the Internet represents derives not from an ideal of human fulfillment but from the narcissistic experience of one's own personality, strengthened by its reflection in the computer screen, as the only significant reality. The major constituents of real cultures—family, religion, ethics, manners, impersonal criteria for distinguishing between truth and falsehood—have shrunk almost to the vanishing point as authorities over individual behavior. This inflation of personality at the expense of external reality did not begin with the computer age; Christopher Lasch chronicled its rise in a book entitled, naturally, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978). Computers and their sibling, cable television, have, however, greatly accelerated the process.

One consequence increasingly visible since about 1965 is the almost total subjectivism of American popular and academic "culture" today in matters of value. Contrary to the intentions of the anthropologists who gave it currency, cultural relativism has evolved to the point where the particular claims of all cultures are simply ignored. Western monogamy and traditional Muslim polygamy are morally equal in the eyes of Chapman's "digerati," not because their sympathy for other cultures is greater than that of previous generations, but because virtually all cultural demands on individual behavior have come to seem equally outdated and meaningless. Why marry at all if you think some other arrangement would suit you better? Nothing is good or true unless it satisfies me at this moment.

The old liberal distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding conduct has little significance if one inhabits a world made up primarily of bytes and images. Like television itself, which exists only to reach the largest possible audience, such a world has no fixed norms; like the Internet, it welcomes virtually any content from any source. Every expression, however violent, pornographic, or merely shallow, is equivalent to all other expressions. "The First Amendment," proclaims Michael Eisner, chairman of the Walt Disney Company, "gives you the right to be plastic."

As it continues to evolve, one can only hope that this expanding post-cultural world will become safer for human beings, because the alternatives to it look perilously weak. Family values, as Chapman says, have some salience with Americans today—polls and other evidence suggest that most people regard the breakdown of the family with dismay—but no form of government action is likely to restore that institution's health. The same applies to other imperatives that used to be central in American life, from politeness to patriotism. The problem is not so much competition from other ideals or cultures as the fading away of all normative standards of behavior and achievement,



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no matter what their source. In the contested suburbs of social ideology, the multiculturalism of the Left and the authoritative community of the Religious Right are both expressions of longing for a past—differently interpreted, of course—that is probably beyond recall. We seem likely to go on traveling in a post-cultural direction for a good while.

"Be not disheartened," Walt Whitman, the prophet of a libertarian America freed from the historic demands of culture, wrote just before the Civil War, "affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet." It would be nice to think so. Meanwhile the age-old problems of freedom have been drastically intensified by the decline of culture. A painfully acute question for the early twenty-first century is whether, once most of the traditional guideposts are gone, individuals who have been freed by technology from everything but their own personalities can rediscover some basis for the harmony and respect that many cultures treasured before anyone dreamed of either computers or multiculturalism.



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# Nicotine, An Autobiography

KAI MARISTED

OF ALL THE LARGE AND SMALL EXTINCTIONS scheduled for the coming millennium, one will be mourned mainly in secret. For some, no loss is more personal and poignant than that of the international, cosmopolitan solidarity of smokers. Day by day its poets and heroes, acolytes and fellow travelers are surrendering ground to a drab two-class society: the despised hardcore *addicts*, and the increasingly righteous majority of *nons*.

Recently, the R. J. Reynolds company launched a "no-secondhand-smoke" cigarette, aimed at fostering the two classes' continued, if uneasy, coexistence. In fact (according to the hoarse whispers of a retired chemist of this butt fiend's acquaintance), a nicotine-free cigarette was perfected years ago in a Winston-Salem laboratory (the chemist hoards a personal stash), but the project was squashed from the top: formula patented six ways to midnight and locked away. Never test-marketed. Whose bright idea was it to sterilize the golden goose?

Drift upstream to first memories and recognize this thing in all its transubstantiations as a kind of third parent. Mama smoked, Papa smoked, bless the child who inhales her own. The dove-gray striations hang in midair over playpen or crib, shiver at the transit of shadow-bodies. Smoke trickles from adult tongues and nostrils along with the stimulating fantastical flow of words. Older, you rise at dawn and, in an otherwise cold and empty living room, find your parents' spoor: butts pyramided in ashtrays, your mother's lipstick smooched onto her brand. Traces of the absent ones. Their half-collapsed unfinished packs prove they can't have gone far. Once, utterly absorbed, you dissect a cigarette: sample the dissolving paper and bitter-copper tobacco, peel gill by gill through the complex fibrous filter. Where does the mystery live? Years later, sobbing in adolescent desolation, you are offered a cigarette by mother or father. Sudden silence. You light

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up—wordless confession here—in the glow of their wistful, wondering approval. *She's nearly grown-up. Look, she's so much like us.* The point is: whatever may divide or change your mortal parents, smoking will remain their unity, your holy ghost.

In any case, you took that first drag young, so long ago that now it's difficult to recall a time when you functioned from one morning to the next with calm coordination without nicotine. That aspect of childhood seems mythical. What can it mean to "quit," when you are in significant part nicotine, just as you are made of water? But maybe in the beginning you did not light up with overt adult approval. Maybe rebellion was the goal—as you split a pack with a girlfriend, hiding out in the woods or an empty lot. To acknowledge this initiation verbally would be uncool, so instead (squinting, furiously shaking the match as it singes your thumb) you discuss rock music, or eyeliner, or French kissing. The hit creeps up inside: dizziness at first, head-sickness. You lean back against the graffiti-blasted wall. Swallow the nausea. Smile to show how you enjoy it. You *do* enjoy it; after all, you're a teenager. You are biologically and psychologically primed for contradictions: the embrace of revulsion, the seduction of risk. So this is your first time? It will be a long affair.

Today, only one of every four adult Americans remains hooked on tobacco. Impressive decline in one generation—following the surgeon general's tirades in the late sixties—but recently the quit rate has pretty much leveled off. Now, one of us in four still huddles against the rain, or winter wind, clothes spoiling, tears in the eyes, numb frozen-sausage fingers pinching a butt. Out here, whoever we are, we don't like one another. This is not anything to have in common. Our minds flee elsewhere—back indoors to our work, or to the party, the play, or lovers' crisis continuing without us—because we don't like the selves out here. Sucking the butt. Calculating how long the fix will last. Or not last. We are one in four, the shelterless lumpen proletariat. Pollsters record that eighty percent of us *want* to quit but fail. Visitors to any hospital may notice a cordon of nurses, orderlies, and doctors, all ferociously smoking, loitering a prescribed twenty-five-foot distance from the main door.

Inhaled, dissolved in the bloodstream, nicotine strikes within eight seconds.

Nicotine, the chief alkaloid in tobacco products, binds stereoselectively to acetylcholine receptors at the autonomic ganglia, in the adrenal medulla, at neuromuscular junctions, and in the brain. Two types of central nervous system effects are . . . a stimulating effect, exerted mainly in the cortex via the locus ceruleus [which] produces increased alertness and cognitive per-



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formance. A "reward" effect via the "pleasure system" in the brain is exerted in the limbic system. At low doses the stimulant effects predominate while at high doses reward effects predominate. Intermittent intravenous administration of nicotine activates neurohormonal pathways, releasing acetylcholine, norepinephrine, dopamine, serotonin, vasopressin, beta-endorphin, growth hormone, and ACTH.

Capisce? Hard-core porn is much easier to lay hands on than serious information on nicotine, though any number of "inspirational" articles and pamphlets offer tips and tricks for controlling the "urge to light up." Do heroin users hope to get clean by sipping water, taking walks, phoning a buddy? But ex-junkies say smoking is harder to give up than dope.

The physiological information above was cribbed from an insert in the patch kit (prescription only, $25), a microscopic text addressed to medical doctors. (The box also contains a how-to in large print for the lay user.) To the butt fiend, this grim sketch of the "pleasure system" foreshadows even more ominous implications. So nicotine transforms to—or replaces—acetylcholine? Consider: as you have smoked with hardly a break since early adolescence, won't your body have lost all ability to make the natural chemical? A form of atrophy? Is the loss reversible? If so, after how long? Meanwhile, what happens in the brain without acetylcholine: raw nerves rasping like metal on metal, without the emollients of serotonin, dopamine, and the rest? Slippage of concentration? Mental seize-up? Or is all this just an excuse, are you exaggerating, paranoid, inventing agonies to come?

Another snip: the *New York Times* (August 31, 1994) reports that "some people's genes may predispose them to both smoking and depression." Psychiatrists suggest these unfortunates choose between nicotine or Prozac. This is a choice? For some doomed quitters, even Prozac brings no relief, and "smoking may be the lesser of two evils, since life is not worth living under the constant drain of depression." There is active suicide, and there is passive suicide, and sometimes fear feels like nothing more than hyperactive depression.

So why not switch to gum or the patch? No stain, no smell, no sticky carcinogenic compounds. The drug pure and simple, in a sanitary, socially sanctioned delivery form. It would be like going on methadone. Why not?

OVERDOSAGE: The oral minimum acute lethal dose in human adults is 40 to 60 mg (less than 1 mg per kilo). . . . Symptoms of poisoning include pallor, cold sweat, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, disturbed hearing and vision, peripheral paralysis.

It's not just the tar, stupid. Or the two-hundred-odd additives. It's a



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unique compound, $C_{10}H_{14}N_2$, this central soothing and stimulating miracle molecule, nicotine.

According to Lauren Bacall (who, despite Bogie's fatal cancer, went on smoking), the stagey business with cigarettes is thoroughly and boldly erotic, a semiotic of seduction in real life as on the screen. Wordless intimacy, often between strangers: widened eyes reflecting the shared flame, fingertips brushing. The hazy expulsion of pleasure, through relaxed, parted lips.

You hate propaganda. You despise the self-appointed smoke militia, with its Frankenstein's-lung horror posters and public humiliation tactics. To quintuple the cigarette tax showed majority rule in action (since three out of four voters won't pay), but none of the windfall goes to redeem the sinners from their vice. Meanwhile, strangers stop you on the street to say you are killing your children. Presumably these are the same vigilant citizens who want to jail pregnant women for drinking alcohol. These days, puffing in public feels daring again: a political act.

Even in pregnancy, you never exactly quit—although morning sickness imposed limits. Later—while smoking—you anxiously observed each baby for telltale stuntedness. As for your own mother, she smoked on with gusto and abandon until the tracheotomy in her cancerous throat forced a sudden no-backsliding policy. Watching her waste away, you did not dream of quitting. On the contrary. It was a stressful time, and without snatched respites of inflating your lungs with a cloud—then rising on its wave of nicotine—you'd have lost your grip completely. Hey, baby: you and Lauren Bacall.

Two or three packs a day. But no cough, no symptoms, heaven knows weight's no problem, and you're healthier than most your age. The smoke curling from under your study door is a family joke. Work hard: the price per pack keeps ratcheting up. At least you don't squander money on frills.

At a party someone asks: Why can't we use tobacco the way the Indians did? Once a month or so the tribe gathered, old and young, men and women, they passed the pipe, got buzzed, had some visions—then they could leave it alone. Why can't we?

Ah, the mouthwatering cigarettes of Europe. The aromas of steeped espresso and black tobacco tangle in sidewalk cafés. Schoolgirls with round creamy faces chain-smoke cigarettes, as do drop-dead elegant old women. Here's freedom. Here's to the republic of enlightened pleasure. (You wake up in your hotel room in the dark before dawn, clammy from the recurrent inexplicable nightmare of dying by your own hand. Switch on the lamp, fumble for a Gitane filter, with fingers stained ocher yellow.)



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One year later, in Boston, a receptionist collects our checks. Sixty dollars times twenty-five "clients": no shabby wage for two hours of wonder-curing. Sultry summer afternoon. Climate of last-ditch hope and boisterous confession: we trump each other's stories, laughing in the relief of self-abasement. The famous healer enters. He is short with a trim beard and has preserved his furry Russian accent. We strain to identify words. While pacing inside our circle, talking, talking, he insists he is not a hypnotist. Stare at any man long enough and you will either fall in love or in hate. He pounces on the miracle—for one whole hour no one here has smoked. As the finale, we each receive a moment of personal concentration. He splays pale manicured hands over my head and sighs, "You have beautiful body. Must take care for it, please." Please.

Outside I feel uplifted—or already woozy from withdrawal. This determination to not-smoke is like biting down on a coin while undergoing an unpleasant medical procedure. Determination lasts all the way to the middle of the next morning. When it collapses, the first almost-virginal, mind-bending, releasing drag tastes alien, like a swig of lifesaving water from a dirty, rusted pipe.

Your youngest child would rather sing and dance than plug into Nintendo. But this winter he's tortured by a series of colds and coughs. Bruise-brown smudges appear under his eyes. One day, audible in his breath is a faint fogged whistle in each inhalation, like wind soughing at the end of a long cave. Does he notice this sound himself? Oh, he says, it's nothing special. For a long time now, he can't breathe in all the way.

Not-smoking hurts. You picture your brain as remodeled by Oz: all cotton wool and flashing needles. After an hour, two at most, an intense constriction radiates from your chest—the heart—outward through shoulders and arms and down through the lobes of lungs. Paradoxically, not-smoking unleashes this sense of acute suffocation.

What is not true: that chewing on pencils, jellybeans, or any placebo can dull the edge of this claustrophobic tension; nor can fingering worry beads, or knitting, or sipping all-day liquids. So it's not oral satisfaction, or toys to fiddle with, that you crave. The truth is: as your nicotine titer drops, the neural network is being frayed and flayed apart. Nerves scream for the chemical they need to reconnect.

Also not true: that you are excessively irritable or uncontrolled. On the contrary, every not-smoking moment is a monument to extreme self-control. (In your worst dream, you notice an already half-smoked cigarette wedged between your fingers.) You may even be more tolerant of others than before. An inner catastrophe puts minor disturbances in perspective.



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As after any devastating breakup, along with weeping jags, guilt spasms, resurgent desire, sleeplessness, apathy, incredulity, and the rest, comes virulent hatred. My nose is morbidly sensitive. I won't enter rooms that hold a recollection of smoke. To see someone light up gives me a queasy rush, like watching a surgeon's incision. I hate the tobacco companies and how their genius for exploitation exemplifies the sanctioned cannibalism of our species. As a girl, I used to see myself mirrored in the magazine ads for Parliaments and Winstons—prophetically prettier, adept at tennis or sailing, bookended by adoring males. With each cigarette I consumed, the infinite distance between myself and that image felt halved.

Times change. The market strategists' targets for the year 2000 in the United States are small kids. Poor city kids: the Little Friends of Joe Camel. But will there be enough budding butt fiends to save Joe? Not to worry. The serious money will come from smoke in distant places. Ad campaigns in Asia and Africa already depict female smokers as educated, affluent progressives, making a successful raid on the traditional bag of male privilege. There's truth to this, of course. And imagine: out there swarm billions of potential new customers. Girls discarding the veil, entering the factory, savoring that heady, hard-earned first drag. It's exciting. There's still a killing to be made in tobacco stocks.

What seemed unutterably necessary is gone. What was always knotted so tightly into minutes and hours has been stripped out. The days lurch along without punctuation. How to end a meal? Complete a phrase? Launch into a phone call? Blunt boredom, stifle hunger, anesthetize the heart against an insult or a break?

Who on earth are you now, anyway?

Paradoxically, this pervasive dizziness, this goofy light-headedness is a lot like those powerful first smokes. The short-term memory is shot to hell, though. Names mean nothing, calls go unreturned, plans are jettisoned, deadlines blown. Time seems both compressed and elongated, squeezed like a gummi-worm. But someone still wakes, sleeps, cries, and laughs, too. Apparently some kind of you is continuing without the old central assumption, deep-sigh rhythm of inspiration. Just how flimsy are the rest of the assumptions that make up "you"?

Would you suffer for any principle? What are your other addictions? Are you an alcoholic, salt or caffeine abuser, raving egotist, love junkie? Do you love those whom you say you love? Aren't the attributes you claim—"shy," "ambitious," "loyal," for example—merely chance conventions? You are in fact bold, complacent, and faithless.

Is there anyone who could know you?



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*We hear you're quitting. We understand that you are not yourself.*

No, but facing a choice between suicide and loss of marbles, it seems better to go crazy. At least you can still change your mind.

*You must be proud of yourself!* they say.

A. Alvarez, from his recent book *Night*:

> Loewi prepared two frogs, stimulated the vagus nerve of one, causing its heartbeat to slow down, then transferred the blood from the first frog's heart to the second's; when that slowed too, Loewi had his answer: nerves . . . transmitted their signals chemically. Later it was shown that the chemical in question, Loewi's *vagustoff*, was acetylcholine, the neurotransmitter that triggers dreams.

You sleep as if clubbed, but for only a few hours at a time. Instead of dreams you have waking hyperreal hallucinations. Daily, you weep. This is all chemical, don't forget. No sense looking for a "cause" for your constant anxiety, although certain randomly fired images—of a snowy street in Berlin, for example, of a stray cat purring over milk, of a sick friend outlined by the light of a window—can twist the anxiety to a new pitch. All of these images show something that no longer exists. They are about loss.

As in a fairy tale, rewards for the done deed materialize out of nowhere. Amazing—for once in life, promises are kept. Revisit that mirror: now that Cinderella has quit playing with ashes, her eyes are clear, her teeth pearlier, her cheeks rosy from a fresh supply of hemoglobin. Open the medicine cabinet, toss out aspirin, tablets and syrups against nausea and heartburn. You haven't needed any of this in weeks.

The newly laid-on five pounds of flesh make it easier to sit on hard chairs as well as to stay outdoors in winter. Even in freezing weather there's a reassuring sting of circulation in fingers and toes. Improved circulation brings other awarenesses and awakenings. From butt fiend to sex fiend—is that the happy ending?

You sprint across parking lots, dash two-steps-at-a-time up stairs. Often one of these exuberant bursts releases a second level of power and stamina. You might as well be flying. Physical energy demands outlet—you scrub the smoke-yellowed windows and walls, vacuum exuberantly. Cinderella, who used to suffer embarrassment over so many things—her dull gray skin, russet fingers, the smell of the house to visitors—now shudders at the whiff from a smoker's smile. That stench of decay. *Get away, Death-Breath!* Now, rooms which used to hold pots of ashes offer bowls of dried perfumed flowers instead. You can take a walking tour of good smells. Hey, Cinderella, high on all these changes—admit that your house has never before been nearly so nice and clean.



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From *The Oxford Medical Companion*:

ACETYLCHOLINE (ACh) is the body's most important neurotransmitter, i.e. a chemical substance liberated at nerve endings which transmits impulses to muscle and other nerve cells.

There is more, and cross-references, but nothing really new, nothing that explains. I feel like a gumshoe, hunting clues. Remember: tobacco is not categorized as a drug. But the *Companion* notes that lack of acetylcholine is a direct cause of myasthenia gravis. Also: the popular paralytic curare (featured in numerous fictions) works by inhibiting reception of acetylcholine. Such bits and hints color a ubiquitous, on-and-off quest reminiscent of Kafka's K., or Pynchon's V. Here in the library this cramped print, the silence, the *x, y, z* coordinates of thousands of books, all demand concentration. I have no concentration, only this flickering nausea. What is acetylcholine?

*Incredible. So you've actually done it,* friends say.

Nothing's "done" yet. The friends tend to lower their voices on the subject of smoking, as if afraid of starting off the avalanche of my backslide. Understandable. Statistically, women who have smoked since trainer-bra days don't stand much chance. I know a sports pro who cold turkeyed for five months, then, laughing like a lunatic at her defeat, caved in. I know a quadruple bypass survivor who mail orders gourmet cigars. There's a drugstore clerk here, smokeless ten years, who bitches about her unabated craving with every pack she sells.

I'm lonely. I've joined a health club, pay to jog on a treadmill, and don't even smile at the joke. Evenings I don't pretend to work. I'm hotly envious of the stars in TV movies—how they can smoke in the role, with the grand gesture. At the apex of terror or joy, the stars raise half-closed eyes to heaven and suck in the miasma, as if re-inhaling their own souls. Suddenly I remember what it was like to have heart's balm literally at one's fingertips.

It's been five months. I don't miss the taste or ritual, but who can tell me whether I'll ever find a way back to myself—to simply being instead of changing. Back to being me. Able to work as I used to, to concentrate, to grapple with a concept. Here, this is the hardest temptation: missing nicotine as soul food, to fill the void where I used to be.

I go looking for the past and by luck rediscover a friend who disappeared more than ten years ago. When we were young and outrageous, we danced together in disco contests, dated two brothers, praised each other, shared favorite clothes and shelter. I'm glad to have found her again.

These days she lives in a penthouse, an uncurtained fishbowl in the



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clouds. Her parents have passed away. She beat alcoholism by throwing her whiskey in the river two years ago. She was a good architect but no longer needs to work. There's no furniture. My friend sits on the floor, which is a sea bottom of possessions—books, pottery, unhung paintings, shoes, unwashed dishes—all dusty, filmed with ash or oil. With her strong hands and sure movements (she once apprenticed to a carpenter), she is rolling a homemade cigarette. Giving a sideways grin, she holds up fingers briefly to show that they no longer tremble. Her fingers are yellow, her teeth are brown. It's hard for me to look at her etched frown and wrinkle-puckered lips. Carefully, she pokes a few crumbs of hashish, recently legalized where she lives, into the tobacco threads.

"Don't lecture, okay?"

"I know it's useless. I won't."

"The dope," she says, "I think I could give up. I've done it before. But nicotine is something else."

Two days later, she drives me to the station. Smoking a fat one down to the last gram. Flicking that scrap away, down into the track, so we can hug good-bye. We're both crying. Her tears slide through my hair. Her low voice resonates in my own head. "The only thing that might give me the strength for it," she says, "is if you ask me to quit because you love me."

"Please. I love you!"

Then I climb on the train and find a window to watch her walk away.

At home sometimes, in an apprehensive reflex, I still hold my breath and listen. But the frightening sounds are gone. My little boy's chest is clear, he doesn't gasp or cough, no matter how recklessly he sings.



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# *A Moment for Wife and Husband*

GREGORY DJANIKIAN

To watch her painting an oil
of your garden, delphinium,
coral bell, foxglove and hollyhock.

To watch her standing in her white hat
beside the French easel, her wrist
bent just so, the brush lightly touching

canvas where now and again now
in dark blue, viridian, burnt umber,
flower and stem arrive and hold.

To be out of range of her seeing,
perhaps in the tall uncut grass
of the hillside behind,

peripheral, shadowy,
only a movement along the thin edge
of what does not contain you.

To feel her focus begin to narrow
and blaze on panicle or calyx,
whorled leaf or spike, her hand



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barely moving, her eye fixed
only on the *there* of garden
and within the frame of garden retrieved.

To envy, then, the concentration,
enfolded, exclusionary,
all things around her falling off,

house, tree, hill, and grass,
and now you retreating quietly
toward kitchen or study,

forced to surrender the moment
to her, hers from the beginning
to shape, to be shaped by,

hers alone this attentiveness,
this fervor deep in the life
she keeps returning to you.

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# *For My Mother*

SIDNEY WADE

At the time of your long dying you touched
with your clumsy hand the firm white body
of my baby your skin so fragile it wept
and your eyes bright and wet as the scales of a fish
My little white whale you called her your language

richer in metaphor the thinner your grasp
on us as you swelled in the white trunk
of redundant flesh that spread in your bed
as you died We spoke on the phone
and you wandered—a visit to me in Oklahoma

you said such a nice visit and then you were gone and
I was fiercely glad for you no more pain no more overflowing
vessels no more unbearable weight And the moon
has filled now many times and the glaze on my eyes
comes and goes and sometimes the mornings are heavy

The baby is two and gives us great joy but I need
to know where you have gone is it off in the waters
or bright and permanent in the sky?
your body is now ash and in the dirt
but I need to know do you correspond

with the stony mass of the spheres? do you rock
in some dark grand basin lapping the shores
of the light and the tangible? do we breathe
you in with the air? do you still swell with love
to the drum of her small, splendid heart?

✪ SIDNEY WADE's poems have appeared in many magazines, including *Harper's*, the *Yale Review*, the *New Criterion*, and the *New Yorker*.



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# The Death of Plato

JAMES V. SCHALL

*But there is another sort of old age too: the tranquil and serene evening of a life spent in peaceful, blameless, enlightened pursuits. Such, we are told, were the last years of Plato, who died in his eighty-first year while still actively engaged in writing.*
—Cicero, *On Old Age*

In Volume III of his *Order and History,* Eric Voegelin reflected on the central importance of both Plato and Aristotle. His treatise on Plato is an extraordinary analysis of Plato's life and abiding philosophic importance. When I ask a class to read this volume on Plato, I insist that they do not read the last short paragraph of this book until they have read rest of the book. I do not want them to miss the astonishment that I myself experienced on first reading it. Too often, of course, such is human nature, this admonition not to read a designated passage has the effect of tempting most readers to read first what is not to be read until last. This reaction is not necessarily a bad idea in reading any book, except perhaps a detective story or Voegelin's book on Plato.

The last paragraph of Voegelin's treatise is a poignant account of the death of Plato. The charm of this passage matches the spell that Plato himself sought to cast in his writings. Plato invoked this very literary charm to incite us to pass to the higher things or at least to render us benevolent to them. Indeed, it was his answer to Homer. He realized that if his own style were not as splendid in its way as that of Homer, his philosophy would not be read by anyone except the philosophers. And it was precisely those who were not philosophers who most threatened the life of the philosopher.

In violation of everything I have intimated in the previous paragraphs, however, I am going to begin this consideration by citing precisely this last paragraph of Eric Voegelin on the death of Plato. I

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can think of no justification for this procedure except that it is the only way I know to reflect with some care upon a certain extraordinary line of thought that Voegelin's ending can kindle in us about the ultimate meaning of Plato. In considering the death of Plato, moreover, we are naturally and rightly prepared to compare it with the death of Socrates as Plato himself recounted that famous death in his own dialogues, in the *Euthyphro*, *The Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo*.

We wonder which of the two deaths was the more profound, granting that the death of Socrates was infinitely more memorable and graphic. Plato perhaps had no Plato to account for his own death, though Cicero recalled its serenity. Could this missing philosophical account of the death of Plato be what Voegelin, in the sparest fashion, belatedly tried to supply? The life of Plato subsequent to the execution of Socrates, no doubt, is consumed by the question that the death of Socrates had left Plato as a young man to resolve: namely, whether there is a city in which the philosopher will not be killed. Evidently, Plato in the end found, or perhaps even founded, such a city. He was not killed. In the city he founded, we still read about Socrates.

Plato's own famous pupil, Aristotle, to be sure, had once remarked, after an anti-Macedonian movement in Athens, that he himself had fled Athens, lest it be "guilty of the same crime twice." But Socrates himself did not choose flight or banishment to another city to avoid the same crime once. Surely, we do not want to suggest that Aristotle lacked bravery. Did Aristotle mean rather that there was nothing philosophically to be gained in making the same point twice? Aristotle knew the lesson of the end of *The Republic*, that if we do not choose our demon rightly the first time, we shall not likely choose it rightly a second or third time. Was philosophy already safe then because of what Plato had established to replace Athens, that is, his philosophical Academy in which the memory of Socrates would remain alive? When Aristotle subsequently found himself in Asia Minor or in Pella, was he actually in the same city that he had left, the one within Athens that Plato had bequeathed beyond his own death? Does the antagonism between politics and philosophy remain in all existing cities? Do philosophy and politics both point beyond themselves?

## II

No doubt, we sense a distinct ominousness in the later dialogues of Plato, especially in the *Gorgias*, a dialogue full of foreboding, of war and strife, as its first lines intimate. The philosopher attempts to deal with the shrewd politician who has the power to kill him. When the politician chooses not to participate in the philosopher's sole protec-



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tion for his life, namely, in the continuation of honest discourse about what "true politics" really are, we know the philosopher is dead. His only safety is found if the politician will examine the issues with him. Already in *The Republic*, the philosopher who returned to the Cave and told his experiences to his former companions was in danger of his life. The prisoners did not want to hear that their life was not the real one.

Does Plato's serene death mean rather that philosophy has been rendered harmless, that Plato died still writing in peace because philosophy no longer threatened the order of existing regimes? Do the politicians now control philosophers by threat of death? Plato himself, in his dealings in Sicily, came close to death a couple of times in his efforts to educate the tyrant. We have no reason to assume that Plato was a coward. He did not dispute Socrates' courage and strength. Plato's death seems to portend something else, however, something on a par with the noble death of Socrates. Thus we would be surprised if the death of Plato, in some other way, did not also match the death of Socrates in philosophic profundity. How are we to think about these things?

The following passage about Plato's final day in 347 B.C. is the conclusion to Eric Voegelin's *Plato*: "Plato died at the age of eighty-one. On the evening of his death he had a Thracian girl play the flute to him. The girl could not find the beat of the nomos. With a movement of his finger, Plato indicated to her the Measure." What is to be noted about this riveting passage? First of all, we observe that Plato died in his own bed. He was some eleven years older than Socrates at the latter's death. Plato did not drink hemlock by order of the laws of the democracy. To be sure, he did die in the evening, like Socrates. Athens could have let Socrates die of old age, but it chose instead to execute him at seventy. Athens, however, did let Plato die of old age. Old age was the first topic of discussion in *The Republic*. Socrates said that he liked to talk to old men as they had been down a path we all will follow. Plato went further along this path than Socrates.

Socrates' last day in jail, we recall, was announced by Xanthippe, who told Socrates that this day would be a sad one for him as it would be the last time in which he could converse with his friends. All of Socrates' days, he hoped, were spent examining life, to see if it was worth living. He had spoken with those who were said to be wise because he wondered about the Oracle who said that he was the wisest man in Greece. No one else proved to be wise except in his limited speciality. Socrates' days were spent in talking to his friends, something he enjoyed doing.

Socrates' last day is best described as his second trial. His first trial before the jury at Athens left certain things unsettled. The friends of



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Socrates were quite unhappy with it all. Socrates' life could not end without completing his conversations with the potential philosophers examining him about what he was doing. Socrates' conversation did end on his last day. He finished what he had to say. The potential philosophers had only tears, not refutations, to offer. Socrates took the hemlock calmly.

For an older friend like Crito, the death of Socrates initially represented a defeat, a slurring of Crito's public reputation. For everyone in the city knew that a rich man, as Crito was, could easily afford to bribe Socrates out of jail. But Socrates debated with Crito about why Socrates should remain in jail and suffer, though the execution could not be called a punishment since nothing can hurt a good man. Clearly such an extraordinary decision of Socrates to obey the laws needed explanation.

But this jail and the sentence were not merited punishments for Socrates as he had done nothing wrong, though he had upset the order of the existing city. He did not know whether death was evil in the first place, so he could not act as if it were the worst evil, to be prevented at all costs. He did know, however, that doing wrong was not open to him. These public arguments at the trial, of course, did not satisfy the young potential philosophers gathered around Socrates on his last day. In this last conversation, Socrates spoke of subjects not easily addressed in public, yet topics that had to be faced in a complete life.

Some of these friends, such as Apollodorus who was to recount *The Symposium* from Aristodemus, were already weeping. They showed thereby that they had not learned Socrates' lesson, that philosophy was a preparation for death. When death is present, the philosopher is present. Was Plato ultimately the one follower of Socrates who understood this? If anything, the young listeners were very annoyed with Socrates, so that they subjected him to a second, more critical, trial, the trial before the potential philosophers about why he could face death so calmly. His apology at the public trial had not satisfied them, nor had it convinced a majority of the jury.

Socrates, by objective standards, may indeed have performed brilliantly at the public trial in handling the accusations of corrupting the youth. Many of these youths, sons of the leading citizens of Athens, were sitting before him on this last day in jail. Many of these same youths had annoyed their fathers, Socrates' accusers, by going home and playfully imitating Socrates. This semi-jesting imitation was why the fathers thought Socrates was undermining the city. This bothersomeness is what brought Socrates, from his hiddenness in his private life, to their public attention. Socrates indeed may have convinced



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some jurors and potential philosophers at the trial that he did believe in the gods, even if not quite believing in the gods of the city. No doubt, in the minds of these young men—among whom, though he was ill on this last day, was the young Plato—Socrates was not guilty as charged in the public trial. But there seemed to be another sort of guilt, even more grave, of which he could be accused. Was the absence of Plato at the death of Socrates related to his own very different death, the death of Plato? Do all real philosophers die in the same way, whether with hemlock or with the sounds of the flute?

## III

From the minute they heard of Socrates' discourse with Crito about how he was bound to Athenian law, the friends knew he was certainly going to die. He had already explained in his *Apology* that he did not want to drift in exile from one city to another and have the same thing happen over and over in any well-ordered city. Nor would he cease to philosophize. But as often as he had told them that philosophy was a preparation for death, something further was needed before they would be satisfied. Of course, the last day of discourse concerned the long and intricate discussion about the immortality of the soul. Socrates' calm before death had intelligible roots that the potential philosophers had not previously understood. The power of the state to kill Socrates always remained. But if it did execute him, it was not a defeat of philosophy. In fact, when the state kills the philosopher, it may strengthen philosophy. The only philosophy that is weakened is that whose teachers yield to the state seeking its own will.

Socrates' execution was the judgment on the state itself. No state was to have legitimate power before philosophy if it conceived itself, on its own standards, to be an alternative to philosophy. The philosopher who is willing to accept death cannot be threatened by the politician who, as we see in the *Gorgias*, loses his power over the philosopher who is unaffected by the politician's most dire threats. Callicles, Meletos, Lycon, and Anytos do preserve the democracy they love. In so doing they demonstrate the danger of democracy, a danger that Socrates evidently considered to be the most subtle danger a philosopher could encounter.

Philosophy, in Callicles' view, is set aside in the politician's youth as something interesting, but not for use as an adult. Philosophy asks questions that the actual state, because of its own disorder, cannot bear. It is better to silence Socrates than to change the regime. The sons of the politicians and craftsmen are expected to follow their fathers, not Socrates. Socrates had called the youth to another life, not



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to the traditional ones. This was the danger he presented. But the real struggle was not with the fathers but with the sons, with their choosing which life to follow. Socrates seldom talked to those who had already decided, who had already definitively revealed their souls as upholders of the polis, of the ways of life of wealth, pleasure, or power. Socrates could only talk with those who could still change their souls.

When students read *The Apology*, I ask them to indicate in the text just where they are in fact themselves present. At first, one catches in their eyes a look of amusement or polite skepticism. What sort of a question is it? How could Plato have included each of them in his Dialogue? Yet, each is there, almost by name, certainly by spiritual reaction. On some reflection, suddenly a student will understand. To be sure, they all might have been there as members of the jury. Some of these very students, no doubt, will sit in similar trials some day and analogously vote to kill Socrates, even though most in their schools would sympathize with Socrates when they read him. Others will be there as one of the three accusers of Socrates, or as the potential philosophers whom Socrates was accused of having corrupted. It is not a bad idea, of course, to place oneself within the dialogues of Plato, to find one's own personality somehow shining through the characters he so memorably describes.

But the immediate answer to the question is that each of us is present when, on reading the trial account, we too accuse this same jury, now alive before us in Plato's account. Plato the philosopher, because he wrote of the trial of Socrates, makes us all participants, whether we like it or not. Socrates, with some amusement, had proposed that his punishment be free room and board at the town hall. He had done nothing but keep the citizens alert to the need to examine themselves daily, itself a good service to any city. He was the gadfly. He kept the citizens from being dull. Socrates then turned to the jurors to single out those who had voted for his condemnation and death. With sudden seriousness in contrast to his previously playful mood, he spoke to them with gravity. He told them that from now on, whenever the story of this trial is told, these jurors will be condemned in the minds of any reasonable man as those who killed the philosopher.

The students clearly recognize in reading the trial that they too had agonized over those two hundred and eighty-one jurors who voted to kill Socrates, that they, too, as Socrates said, would join down the ages those vast legions who have again and again condemned that now immortal and deplorable Athenian jury and, through it, the politics that killed Socrates in a legal trial. Most of today's students, on reading this result, want to go out and change the world, not themselves. They want to become lawyers and doctors. They forget what



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Plato said in Book Three of *The Republic*, that a society filled with students of law and medicine is already a sick society. Many students continue to think that more law and more medicine will cure what can only be cured by a reform of their own souls. Again by contrast, we recall that Plato died calmly, at first sight undramatically, in his bed.

## IV

On reading of the death of Plato, however, do we, down the ages, also become present at his death? Of course we do. Again we see Plato, in his eighties, a man who has mostly finished *The Laws* in which Socrates as such does not appear. Plato was given enough life to complete his projects, to consider all sides of the death of Socrates. He graphically delineated the souls of each of the major and even the minor characters we find in the sundry dialogues—Theages, Meletos, Cebes, Thrasymachus, Pausanias, Alcibiades, Polemarchus, Cleitophon, Laches, Gorgias, Ion, and many others. Each had his part. Plato understood the complexity of character, of life.

And who is at Plato's death? He does not have a room full of followers seeking to copy down the final revisions of *The Laws*. No conversation seems left to complete. Aristotle is not there. Nor is Dionysios. His older brothers Glaucon and Adeimanthus are not there. No Xanthippe is there. No three sons. No potential philosophers. Who is there is a young flute player, a Thracian girl. She is not there in any erotic capacity. Plato evidently wants her to play the flute, that special instrument about which he so carefully discoursed in *The Republic*. That is to say, the philosopher dies to the sound of music. The music is not a therapy, but a pleasure. Aristotle had remarked that the gentleman should know music but should not be able to play a musical instrument too well. He knew that to play music well required a lifetime of study and practice, a lifetime that would prevent the gentleman from knowing the higher things, however much music might be related to them, as it intrinsically was.

Plato, of course, does not call in an accomplished flautist, as, presumably, he might have. He calls in the maiden who cannot find the measure. He can still teach her the measure. He moves his finger indicating the beat and rhythm. We are not told whether she picks it up correctly, but we assume she does. We assume that Plato died having heard the right measure, that he died listening to the flute as it should be played. His death would not have been complete had he not heard the correct measure. Thus Plato hears the flute with the proper measure.

Who is this flute player? We note she was a Thracian. In *The Sympo-*



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*sium*, when the banquet was about to begin, a flute girl entered the room ready to play. The diners at Agathon's house discuss drinking, as the three old men also do in the early books of *The Laws*. The guests at Agathon's table had all been drinking heavily the evening before. So they decide not to drink, or at least not to drink in competition or in excess. If someone might want some wine, that was quite all right, but if he did not, that was all right also. The banquet was convivial, pleasant. Even Socrates had dressed up for the occasion—"fresh from his bath and sandalled." But when this conversation, or rather when the speeches began in earnest, the wine was moderate and the flute girl left, only to return at the end when Alcibiades unexpectedly roars into the room.

The flute girls at Plato's death and at Agathon's banquet are mindful of the Thracian maidens. The Thracian maidens are those very normal and delightful young women who tell us better than anyone else what most people think of philosophy, think of what Socrates does with his days. Aristotle, it will be recalled, remarked that the philosopher Thales proved the usefulness of philosophy by gaining a monopoly on the oil and wine presses so that when the bumper season arrived, having himself studied all the signs of nature, all the unlearned growers had to pay him handsomely to use his presses. But as he did not want the money, being a philosopher, he was just illustrating that the philosopher was poor because he chose to be, because his time was better spent in other things. The philosopher knew something about music and about business, but he was not a musician or a businessman.

However, when two famous philosophers were walking down the road one day learnedly discussing the stars and other exalted things, one of them fell into a hole that he unfortunately did not see because of his absorption in philosophy. Seeing this, to them, absurd incident, the Thracian maidens began to giggle and laugh at the philosopher. Most of the human race, subsequently, would side with the Thracian maidens. One might suggest from this famous tale that the Thracian maidens ultimately also needed to be attracted to philosophy. Is it too much to suggest that, in Voegelin's account, this Thracian flute girl at the deathbed of Plato, fumbling with the measure, hints at a possible resolution?

But Plato's death has a further implication. The flute girl did, evidently, when taught, catch the measure. She was not unteachable. Philosophy seeks the eminently teachable. Plato himself knew the measure. That is to say, Plato died, to borrow Josef Pieper's felicitous phrase, "in tune with the world." Plato did not make the measure. He discovered it. He knew it. Protagoras in a famous phrase had affirmed



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that "man is the measure of all things." In his *Laws*, Plato had argued rather that we are the puppets of God, that our works and days, even our highest human sciences, even politics, are not serious, at least not in comparison with God. "God is the measure of all things." We are to spend our days "singing, dancing, and sacrificing" because this is the only response we can make to the good *that is*.

Thus, when Plato dies, he dies according to a measure that he knew but did not constitute. The Thracian girl picked up a beat that she imperfectly blew into her double-reed flute, but she did not quite know how it worked. Plato taught her the measure. Those who did not know the measure could learn it from the philosopher. The redemption of the flute girls and the Thracian maidens for philosophy finds its source here, in the measure that Plato in dying did not himself constitute but which he knew and knew could be learned by the flute girl. The last person who sees Plato alive is the Thracian maiden, as she plays according to the measure he taught her. Her flute is the last thing he listens to. Plato died with philosophy reconciled to the Thracian maidens and the flute girls. The Thracian maiden who played for him did not laugh at him, the philosopher dying. She did not think it mockingly amusing that this dying philosopher should call for her so that he might listen to the flute as he left this world. The philosopher is not laughed at. He is attended to, for having learned the measure.

## V

Socrates, as he left this world, himself on his last day, had wondered about music. Before his conversation on immortality in the *Phaedo*, Socrates confesses that perhaps he had misunderstood the Oracle. Perhaps the Oracle meant that he should actually compose music or poetry, cultivate the arts. So he did set some passages in Aesop's fables to verse and he set some hymns to the festival gods. And Cicero also recalled that in his old age "Socrates learnt to play that favourite instrument of the ancients, the lyre." Plato realized in *The Republic* that the only way to counteract Homer would be to write a poetry and a music that outcharmed Homer. Plato's music, as we learn each time we read him, was beguiling. Even Callicles was trained in his earlier days by reading with amusement the philosophers, so that there seems to be some missing link between the philosopher and the politician. What had gone wrong in the life of the master politician Callicles? He found the image of Socrates in mature age, still conversing with potential philosophers quietly in corners, to be ridiculous and a waste of time. He had lost the charm. Socrates was unintelligible



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to him, though he sensed him still to be dangerous and thus would not answer his questions. Callicles, the statesman, was unwilling to test his own reasoning. He lacked music. He was unaware of the relation of music and philosophy.

But both the Thracian maidens and Callicles needed to be redeemed by true music and true politics. That is to say, we could not have a city composed only of philosophers, only of shepherds, only of craftsmen, only of politicians, only of flute girls. Harmony required more. Specialization meant that not everyone could be expert in everything else, that it was all right if everyone did not do everything. The philosopher was a specialist in the whole. It was all right that Plato, the philosopher, did not himself play the flute well, but not all right that he did not know anything about it, did not delight in listening to it. Philosophers enjoy music in part because they know it, in part because they know that life is more than philosophy. All things had their harmony in the philosopher who was to know the parts, even the measure of the laws of music. Plato did not ask for a flute so that he could himself play. As he lay dying, he did not act, he listened, until he heard what was not in tune with the measure. Music and nomos were reconciled. The Thracian maiden played. Plato listened. Plato does not die in silence.

At the end of *The Symposium*, "the sound of the flute is heard." Alcibiades, unlike Callicles, has felt the charm of philosophy all his disordered life, even though he had to shut his ears against it. Astonishingly, he compares Socrates precisely to a flute player.

> And are you not a flute-player? That you are, and a performer far more wonderful than Marsyas. He indeed with instruments used to charm the souls of men by the powers of his breath, and the players of his music do so still: for the melodies of Olympus are derived from Marsyas who taught them, and these, whether they are played by a great master or by a miserable flute girl, have a power which no others have; they alone possess the soul and reveal the wants of those who have need of gods and mysteries, because they are divine. But you produce the same effect with your words only, and do not require the flute; this is the difference between you and him.

The melodies of Olympus have a measure. Whether they are played by Marsyas or a miserable flute girl, they have power. They possess the soul and reveal the "wants of those who have need of gods and mysteries." Those who have need of gods and mysteries were those who were not the philosophers. The philosopher had no need of being a musician, but he loved music. He had no need of the mysteries and the gods, but he loved them. What was missing in the cosmos was someone to praise *what is* for what it was, for its own sake.



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## VI

The words of Socrates, Alcibiades tells us, are like music. They have a divine origin. Chaerephon, we recall, had gone to the Oracle at Delphi. His brother Chaerecrates was at the trial and could testify to it. Alcibiades, whose life Socrates had saved at the Battle of Delium, was the most talented and handsome of all the young men of Athens. Socrates loved him in his potential virtue but not in his corruption. Alcibiades stands at the threshold of ruining the city because he rejects philosophy. In his lifetime, he goes on to betray Athens, Sparta, and Persia. He admits that Pericles speaks well, but when Alcibiades heard Socrates, he explained, "I felt as if I could hardly endure the life which I am leading." Alcibiades realized that if he did not "shut his ears" against the words of Socrates, "and fly as from the voice of a siren, my fate would be like that of others—he would transfix me, and I should grow old sitting at his feet." Alcibiades does not grow old sitting at Socrates' feet. Plutarch gives two accounts of Alcibiades' death (404 B.C.). He is murdered by darts either because he debauched a maiden or because he betrayed Lacaedaemon and Persia.

Xanthippe, his wife, is not present when Socrates drinks the hemlock, though she has been there in the morning. The potential philosophers and the good jailer are there. Socrates remembers to offer a sacrifice to the God of Healing, for he is being healed in his death. Socrates entrusts this sacrificial mission to his old friend Crito, who could not get him out of jail with his money because Socrates had forbad him. We realize already at the banquet of Agathon (415 B.C.), however, that Socrates, in undergoing a more severe test than that of death, will not be corrupted by Alcibiades. He will not do wrong for the sake either of Callicles' demos or Alcibiades' own ambitions, or beauty or love, or pleasure, or popularity.

Why must Alcibiades at the banquet in *The Symposium* close his ears to the siren voice of Socrates? "For he makes me confess that I ought not to live as I do, neglecting the wants of my own soul, and busying myself with the concerns of the Athenians; therefore I hold my ears and tear myself away from him." Alcibiades knows perfectly well why he acts as he does. In this explanation he is more revealing than Callicles, though both of them do the same thing in refusing to listen to Socrates. "For I know that I cannot answer him or say that I ought not to do as he bids, but when I leave his presence the love of popularity gets the better of me. And therefore I run away and fly from him. . . ." Alcibiades takes the only escape possible. He refuses to listen and he immediately seeks to corrupt Socrates so that Socrates will not be superior to him in virtue.



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When Alcibiades fails, he admits to the others that "I could not help wondering at his natural temperance and self-restraint and manliness." Alcibiades wonders about this virtue, but to no avail. Aristotle had said that wonder was the beginning of philosophy. Socrates, in fact, not Alcibiades, was the only one "with any real powers of enjoyment." Alcibiades is thus the model of the opposite of the philosopher-king, more so than Callicles who is not a philosopher. Alcibiades not merely refuses to listen to argument. He also takes positive steps not to know. He does everything in his power not to acknowledge that he is wrong, even though he does know it. He tries to corrupt the only source of virtue he admires so that he will have no model testifying to his corruption.

The worst tyrant, as we recall from Book One of *The Republic,* was the one who did evil or whatever else he wanted. But this same tyrant not merely wanted to do evil or what he wanted, he also wanted to be praised by everyone for what he did. This praise is crucial, for it implies that even evil needs rational approbation. Otherwise, as Socrates shows us in the *Gorgias,* the tyrant is utterly alone and in the worst possible position. The ring of Gyges, the original invisible man who could do what he wanted if only he were not seen, corrupted also the people in defiling the shepherd who found the ring and corruptly became a king. In the *Gorgias,* the worst tyrant is the one who thinks that to do evil is better than to suffer it. He is the one who refuses punishment for his evil rather than freely accepting it and therefore acknowledging a good he did not make.

## VII

At the end of *Alcibiades I,* Alcibiades seems to have decided to follow Socrates; he has shown that he could follow the highest arguments of virtue posed by the philosopher. "I shall begin at this moment to take trouble over justice" Alcibiades explains. To this happy thought, Socrates responds, "And I would wish you to continue doing so. Yet, I stand in dread, not because I do not have trust in your nature, but rather because, seeing the strength of the city, I fear that it will overcome both me and you." In a sense, we have here the preview of the young Augustine, the two loves and the two cities. Socrates lived a private life because he expected he would have been killed long ago if he did not. However ready for death he was, he did not seek it, but suffered it if it came along. *The Symposium* revealed that Alcibiades, not Socrates, was the one seeking the beloved. What ultimately attracted Alcibiades, in spite of himself, was philosophy, the love of wisdom and truth. Socrates, for his part, realized that Alcibiades could also corrupt



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him, the philosopher, as well as himself. How? Because of another love, the love that Alcibiades confessed that he was attracted to whenever he left Socrates' presence. Politics, when it did not feel the charm of philosophy, remained the most serious opponent to philosophy.

If Socrates is the real flute player, as Alcibiades said, is it not of some interest that Plato dies alone, in old age, of a natural death, with the sole consolation of a flute player, a Thracian maiden who does not know the measure? "God is the measure of all things." Plato knew the nomos. His death was in tune with everything that was in the cosmos, the measure. Plutarch said that, as a young man, Alcibiades "obeyed all his masters fairly well, but refused to learn upon the flute, as a sordid thing. . . ." If we recall the Thracian maiden who played the flute for Plato when he showed her the measure, on the evening of the day on which he died, isn't that refusal of Alcibiades an extraordinary thing? In the *Crito,* Crito himself remarked that Socrates could also have been exiled to Thessaly, another wild place like Thrace. Crito's friends there would give Socrates complete protection and there they would make much of the philosopher. But, of course, Socrates realized that in a Thrace or a Thessaly the philosopher would be merely an oddity, a showpiece. He would have had no one with whom to speak. Socrates tells Crito that their long years of "serious discussion" have taught them both that "to do wrong is in every sense bad and dishonourable for the person who does it."

In his last words in *The Apology,* Socrates spoke of death, of going to the Isles of the Blessed, where he would meet the gods and the heroes, where he would even meet Homer; the old quarrel between poetry and philosophy could be resolved. Even Socrates wanted to continue his conversation beyond death to find out who really is wise. When Plato dies, however, he does not, like Socrates, seem to anticipate this further conversation. What he seems to anticipate rather is the music—that is, the praise. We should spend our lives "singing, dancing, and sacrificing." Plato does not, like Socrates, seek among the gods and heroes to find him who is "really wise" and him who "only thinks that he is." Plato understood the Alcibiades who refused to learn the flute. Plato did not refuse to listen to Socrates, the master flute player.

Plato taught the Thracian maiden the nomos, the measure. Plato knew the flute. He taught her this measure the evening he died. The Thracian maiden did not laugh at him. He heard her play the flute. He knew the measure, that he was not the measure himself. "God is the measure of all things." The Thracian maiden learned the measure. Philosophy, poetry, and politics are reconciled. In the Academy of Plato, we can still catch strains of the measure, even in any existing



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city, but only if we worry, like Socrates, about the demos, about the love that has no order.

In Book Ten of *The Republic*, after mentioning the "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry," Socrates admits that

> "if poetry directed to pleasure and imitation have any argument to give showing that they should be in a city with good laws, we should be delighted to receive them back from exile, since we are aware that we ourselves are charmed by them. But it isn't holy to betray what seems to be the truth. Aren't you, too, my friend (Glaucon), charmed by it, especially when you contemplate it through the medium of Homer?"
>
> "Very much so."
>
> "Isn't it just for it to come back in this way—when it has made an apology in lyrics or some other meter?"

Eric Voegelin was charmed by the death of Plato. Philosophy, Voegelin thought, had fled to the Academy—Plato's Academy not ours—wherein poetry and the pleasure of music are received back, no longer tainted by the polis using them for its own purposes. The apology in lyrics and in meter, in measure, is present in the music of the Thracian maiden playing the flute with the nomos that the dying Plato gave her. Plato died in full tune with the world and with its measure.

## VIII

A friend of mine happened to be in the Stanford Chapel at the memorial service of Eric Voegelin. My friend did not know who Voegelin was at the time, but he made a tape of this moving service. Only about forty people attended the service for Voegelin. Philosophy has fled even the academy. Voegelin seems to have chosen the music, Schubert, and the readings, from Ezekiel, from the First Letter of John, and from the Gospel of John. In his lovely eulogy of Voegelin, Ellis Sandoz remarked that the last time he saw Voegelin, a couple of months before he died, he had just ordered a new edition of Shakespeare's works, as the one he had been using was worn out. Voegelin tried to read the complete works of Shakespeare every year. The day before he died (January 18, 1985), Voegelin spent his time correcting some page proofs of his essay, *"Quod Deus Dicitur,"* a proposition, he remarked, whose "specific form" comes from Thomas Aquinas. The very last word Voegelin ever wrote was "Plato."

On the day of Voegelin's death, a Psalm was read as he passed into unconsciousness. The Psalm was the Twenty-fifth. "Oh, keep my soul, O Lord, and deliver me: let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in Thee." Voegelin died peacefully while this Psalm was being read. As



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his wife was too weak and anxious, the Psalm was read to Voegelin by his American Indian housekeeper whose name was, with splendid paradox, Hiawatha.

All true philosophers, when they die, die the same death. All true philosophers, when they die, die in the same city.

# *Credo*

PAUL HORGAN

Believe in God.
Worship art.
Love as it is given to you to love.
Foster life.
Cherish children.
Work to the limit.
Submit with courage.

Amen
P.H.
22 February 1980

The above credo comes from a manuscript found among the late Paul Horgan's belongings tucked into a blank sketch-pad Mr. Horgan had given to his friend Joseph Reed. It is printed here with the permission of the Paul Horgan estate.



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# *Anniversary*

## *One Fine Day*

WALTER McDONALD

Who would sit through a plot as preposterous as ours,
in love after years apart? Chance meetings may work
early in stories, but at operas, darling, in Texas?
A bachelor pilot, I fled Laredo for the weekend,
stopping at the opera from boredom, music I least expected.
Of all the zoos and honky-tonks south of Dallas,
who would believe I would find you there on the stairs,

*Madame Butterfly* about to start? When you left
four years before, I lost all hope of dying happy,
dogfighting my way through pilot training, reckless,
in terror only when I saw the man beside you.
I had pictured him rich and splendid in my mind
a thousand times, thinking you married with babies
somewhere in Tahiti, Spain, the south of France.

When I saw the lucky devil I hated—only your date,
but I didn't know—he stopped gloating, watching you wave,
turned old and bitter like the crone in *Shangri La.*
Destiny happens only in plays and cheap movies—
but here, here on my desk is your photo, within reach,
and I hear sounds from another room of our house,
and when I rise amazed and follow, you are there.

✪ WALTER McDONALD is Horn Professor of English at Texas Tech University. His most recent books of poems include *Counting Survivors, Night Landings,* and *After the Noise of Saigon.*



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# Indefatigable Alchemist

## Richard Rorty's Radical Pragmatism

TIBOR MACHAN

Not many people from academic philosophy manage to break through the walls of the university and connect with those beyond in their own lifetime. Bertrand Russell did so in the mid-twentieth century and Jean-Paul Sartre did it, though largely through his literary works. Richard Rorty, Professor of Humanities at the University of Virginia, formerly a prominent member of the Princeton University Department of Philosophy, is an exception—he has come by his prominence through philosophical essay writing alone. It is his message that appears to have attracted some popular, non-academic attention. Rorty reached fame in part because he denounced academic philosophy, the discipline in which he made his name and where he still writes and is very respectfully discussed by most professional, which is to say academic, philosophers.

Rorty's main complaint is that philosophy is too professionalized. Its avowed purpose of attaining a specialized or expert transcendent understanding of the nature of things is out of the question—so what has it to offer? We should take a radically different view of philosophy, he feels, one that views philosophy as a sort of educated conversation everyone can take part in. Rorty believes that, contrary to those who champion the vital role of philosophy, "we can still make admirable sense of our lives even if we cease to have what [Thomas] Nagel calls 'an ambition of transcendence.' . . . A culture without this ambition—a Deweyan culture—would be preferable to the culture of what Heidegger calls 'the onto-theological tradition,'" which welcomes philosophical understanding that plays no significant role.

For Rorty the best kind of philosophy appears in the pages of magazines such as the *New York Review of Books*, THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, the *New Republic*, etc., not in academic journals. The sort of topics taken up in philosophy journals and books, such as whether the mind is part of the natural world or something alien to it, whether ideas may be shown to have universal meaning or gain what they mean from their use in the language of a given community, whether free will or determinism is true—just have no valid place in the discipline. These topics and the issues surrounding them have been taken over by one or another of the special sciences.

Accordingly, Rorty is calling, as have some prominent figures of philosophy in the past, among them Hegel and Wittgenstein, for the end of philosophy, at least as an academic discipline. Rorty takes it that philosophy plays, or ought to play, a subservient role to such other concerns as politics and art rather than fancy itself as having some kind of determining influence on them—let alone serve as the ultimate criteria for their intelligibility as aspects of human life and culture. He arrives at these notions from a variety of directions, which gives him his critical stance, one that takes no determinate systematic stand on philosophical issues but expresses dismay with the failure of philosophy to have reached consensus about its various traditional topics.

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Actually, there is a philosophical position lurking in the back of nearly all of Rorty's ideas, one that has been a vital part of the philosophical work of all of human history. It seems, when we consider some of his key ideas, that Rorty is utterly skeptical about human beings ever gaining a good understanding of the world in which they live, of attaining wisdom, of learning about the nature of important things, of importance per se, and especially about the nature of reality itself. A broad, overarching understanding seems to be out of our reach for him, and this turns out to be the crucial feature of his general understanding and why it has very wide appeal.

However we come out on the question of how to assess the merits of our own time—and I confess to being skeptical about such grand intellectual challenges ever being met—it may be helpful to explore a bit just what Rorty represents in our own time. What is Richard Rorty's place in our disjointed intellectual era?

Rorty's criticism of much of modern and twentieth-century philosophy fits well within the current climate of so-called post-modernism, characterized mainly by a distrust of human reason. Never mind for now that actually there is very little in this intellectual development that's objectively new, innovative, "post" in some substantive sense—the gist of it has been around, advancing its thesis with greater or lesser success, in various periods of recorded intellectual history since the time of Lao Tzu, Heraclitus, and Pyrrho to our own. Yet where does Rorty's outlook gain its intellectual power and how did it evolve? Is it anything more than the usual skepticism that lurks around the corner in every epoch, urging caution against complacency, inducing apprehension about grand schemes aiming to depict reality, everywhere sniffing hubris?

The position that has brought Rorty to the forefront of academic philosophy is largely one that demeans academic philosophy itself. And one can hardly defend the claim that academic philosophy in the United States and England, indeed, through the English-speaking academic world, has been without major deficiencies. To begin with, most prominent academic philosophers in this tradition have demonstrated nearly total disdain for the tasks that ordinary people associate with philosophy.

Rorty's view is that, as far as different communities are concerned, they *may* at any moment find themselves in congruence about how they see this world or how they have constructed this world, but there isn't an underlying reality on which their assumptions may be founded, and in terms of which some may be declared to be superior to and more accurate than others, and so on. And when there is no congruence among communities—which is clearly the norm regarding religious and ideological matters—no community's understanding can be superior to that of another, in the sense of having a better grasp of reality. This is especially true in matters of ethics and politics. As Rorty put it in his comment on the demise of the Soviet Union:

> Non-metaphysicians [of whom Rorty and, by his account, all other wise men are members] cannot say that democratic institutions reflect a moral reality and that tyrannical regimes do not reflect one, that tyrannies get something wrong that democratic societies get right.

This is the most undiluted moral and political subjectivism, leaving all human actions, institutions, policies, and beliefs morally equivalent and thus wiping out morality from the ground up. But this is not confined to ethics—metaphysics, religion, politics, and aesthetics are branches of philosophy that positivists also roped off as inaccessible to rational thought and discourse.

For Rorty, too, every sphere of human interest is cut off from such rational discourse—or, put more generously, what counts as rational itself becomes a matter of determination by different intellectual communities. What thus drops out from consideration is the possibility of general, fundamental critical assessment of anything at all, the critical assessment that counts as decisive for human life as such. Whether we are considering politics or science—Is the one kind of practice quackery, another bona fide medicine? Is one kind of advice regarding the value of vitamins or lyposuction sound, another silly or a scam?—it is all supposed to be a matter that can only be approached from the perspective of a given community.

The scope of Rorty's approach is tremendous: ethics or art, the treatment of blacks, children, women or the depiction of Nazis, racists, or rapists in drama or the novel—each of these concerns eludes the possibility of ra-



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tional decisive criticism. In every case the court of last resort is not something stable and firm, something every individual may apprehend if he or she will but consult reason, but some community to which one belongs. And, of course, we belong simultaneously to innumerable communities, among which at times we must select those more worthy of our membership than others. But no such selection has a chance. All dissidents are placed into the same class, basically as men and women who just don't get with the program.

Predictably, Rorty explicitly rejects the idea of individual human or natural rights that rest on human nature, since there is no hope to be held out for apprehending the nature of things such that we could affirm, confidently, that someone is being treated inhumanely, in violation of basic, fundamental rights. There is no way to judge someone a quack, provided he or she has a large enough community of believers providing a kind of support group. Examples could go on endlessly.

Richard Rorty started publishing in the late 1950s. He has written numerous books, most of them widely translated—into German, French, Japanese, Italian, and other languages—of which the most well known is *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979). This is the work that debunks much of modern philosophy for being too ambitious, for attempting to paint the philosophical—in particular, the epistemological and scientific—enterprise as aiming to reflect reality as it actually is.

*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* made Rorty a formidable figure in contemporary philosophy, following, as is commonly the case, a very active participation in the continuing argument among philosophers not only in Anglo-American but also European academic and intellectual circles. His other notable work, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) was nearly as popular among intellectuals. The first volume of his collected papers, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), has also shaken the ground in philosophical circles, as has the second volume of this collection, *Essays on Heidegger and Others.*

Rorty is a very serious and active player among the post-modernist-hermeneutical-deconstructionist-anti-foundationalist intellectuals. One difference between Rorty and other major players is that he also contributes to the more popular forums such as the op-ed pages of major dailies in America and England as well as to prominent intellectual periodicals such as the *New York Review of Books,* the *London Review of Books, Dissent,* the *New Republic,* and other journals written for the general public.

Rorty's career is interesting in part because, given his education and active participation in the discussions surrounding analytic philosophy as well as the pragmatic school out of which he comes, one would think he would not be very sympathetic to the mode of philosophizing that comes from the Continent. Most analytic philosophers have resisted until recently the bent of mind evident in mid-twentieth-century European philosophy—chiefly, existentialism and phenomenology. They tended to view it the way the Vienna Circle members of the turn of the century viewed the neo-Hegelian approach exemplified by Bosanquet or Bradley—that is to say, with the greatest dubiety.

It has usually been the belief among educated persons that philosophy is an especially noble and pertinent discipline of learning, bearing on the lives of all human beings by attempting to seek wisdom, a general sense of what it means to be human, and one's connection to the world as a human being instead of as some special class of human beings: student or dentist or parent or political leader. Americans did not differ greatly from this, although there has always been a bit of impatience in America with the heady philosophical system building prominent among European philosophers.

What philosophy addressed was thought to be universally important—what is reality, how do we know it, what are our moral responsibilities, what is a just system of community life, what makes something beautiful or ugly. The dominant approach of most academic philosophy during much of the twentieth century had renounced such issues as the concerns of ideology and, in the last analysis, meaningless, incapable of being made accessible to human inquiry. Although the seeds of this derisive attitude had been sown over several centuries, the most emphatic statements of it were advanced in ours. Logical positivists such as A. J. Ayer, in his slim but very influential book *Language, Truth, and Logic* (Dover, 1936), boldly



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declared metaphysics, religion, aesthetics, ethics, and, at least by implication, politics to be disciplines that are cognitively unmanageable. No one could know the truths of them, so at best they could be consigned to mere expression of emotions, feelings, sentiments. Metaphysics and religion were also deemed woolly nonsense, while normative fields contained disguised expressions of "boos" or "hurrahs," no more. There have always been dissenters, but judging by the prominence of the academic positions of those who tended to agree with Ayer, the dissidents did not fare very well.

The ensuing period of academic philosophy had been anything but a recovery of the old idea of philosophy, an idea that is still embodied in common sense when one's philosophy of life or someone's taking a catastrophe philosophically is considered. Philosophy is supposed to provide us with a glimpse of "the big picture"; it is supposed to help us identify our place in the universe; and it is supposed to help us discover our purpose and the best, proper, right way to achieve it. It is to these sorts of questions that we expect philosophy to address itself. Gary Gutting, editor of the *American Philosophical Quarterly*, remarked on this recently, noting that "rather than promising access to a body of established deep truth, we typically speak of honing logical and linguistic skills or, at best, developing a personal world view." Indeed, often students who look for the classical scope of philosophy enroll in classes in which the topic turns out to be "adverbial" phrases. (I recall that back in graduate school many of my philosophy professors wrote papers entitled "Like" and "About" and scoffed at those foolish few who still thought philosophy dealt with the meaning of life or the nature of reality or what is moral goodness. This was at a time when some renowned Oxbridge philosophers declared that none of those considered philosophers before Bertrand Russell did bona fide philosophy but were mostly ideologues, venting their opinions.)

Ordinary language philosophy, which followed the positivist reign, didn't involve the kind of unified philosophical community that we saw among positivists, but there remained the attitude that philosophy's chief task had to do with little more than clarification. It needed above all to help us find some consistency in how we use language, or, to use Wittgenstein's admittedly problematic yet still clearly thematic idea, to "help lead the fly out of the fly bottle" and rescue us from the "bewitchments of language."

While J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein both saw that the logical positivist approach was not how philosophy must comport itself, they tended to reinforce the retreat of philosophy from the job of attempting to get some clear idea of the larger picture. Even when the ordinary language approach began to experience setbacks, it was more from impatience than from a serious revitalization of the idea of philosophy as a discipline that addresses crucial and basic problems of human living.

The popular perception of philosophy never changed much, but the public need for philosophical ideas tended to lead many in the direction of the Orient. Books such as *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig, caught on, and widespread dabbling in the cults of the maharasha Mahesh Yogi or Maher Baba followed, with the prominent philosophical academics finding themselves more and more irrelevant to what had for all times been conceived by the general public as the province of philosophy proper. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when much of the West saw an outcry for standards by which to defend or challenge existing institutions, prominent philosophy as practiced in the universities and featured in the leading academic journals simply had nothing to offer.

In *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard, 1971), John Rawls did manage to return the attention of many academic philosophers to ethics or, more precisely, politics, yet there was a clear rider in his work—namely, that we must remain very humble in our philosophical ambitions. Moral philosophy, Rawls argued, must be divorced from or made "independent of" the rest of philosophy, such as epistemology or the philosophy of mind. We need to take as our prime data not some fundamental facts of nature, not metaphysical first principles, not, certainly, theological postulates, but intuitions or, as the idea became recycled, "our considered moral judgments." Heaven only knows whose intuitions or considered moral judgments were to count as decisive and why. Philosophy journals began filling up with papers, the starting points of which were stated as these moral intuitions, which usually came to



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nothing more than the biases and sentiments of the authors themselves. Based on such conveniently unphilosophical thinking, academic philosophy managed to reinsert itself into public debate: business ethics, medical ethics, legal ethics, ethics consultation, and the like mushroomed, though it is clear that the philosophical underpinnings of it all left a lot to be desired.

To this development pragmatism, America's only home-grown philosophy school, began to be quite comfortably wedded. Pragmatists have always found fault with the ancient desire to find foundations for our beliefs. Instead, they counseled, we need to see whether our beliefs worked well in the day-to-day living that confronted us; never mind the basis of the beliefs in reality, God, or even sense-experience. Practice makes believable, and there is nowhere else to go in any case.

There has, then, always been an element to pragmatism that has indicated, or at least hinted, at the direction that the post-modernists and deconstructionists have subsequently taken—that is, toward a basic distrust of foundationalism, with its idea that our world view and our various answers to philosophical questions rest on a firm foundation either in some theological notion, or in reason, or sensory experience. Charles Peirce didn't recommend abandoning realism, but reading him in a certain way did appear to suggest that reality is a sort of collective postulate, one that we would arrive at by consulting an ideal community of scientists, one that, of course, will in fact elude us forever. William James is often taken to have had something along this line in mind when some of what he wrote about the concept of truth suggested that such beliefs as those we have in God or free will or reason could be taken to be true if they gave us either individual or collective satisfaction, or if they advanced our lives in measurable ways. Willard Van Orman Quine, the pragmatist who conversed most comfortably with the analytic school, began to move in the direction Richard Rorty eventually took, when he suggested that, though we need some basic beliefs on which to rest our system of ideas, it really makes no difference what we take to be basic to our system of beliefs. We could believe that at bottom reality is composed of atoms or processes or events or even Platonic ideas; as long as we remain consistent within the system, all will be equally rational.

Still, Quine protested that "in ascribing to me that 'claim that there is no "matter of fact" involved in attributions of meaning to utterances, beliefs to people, and aspirations to cultures,' Rorty overstates my negativity." So Richard Rorty goes his own way in his pragmatic turn, of course, as do most of those in this tradition of philosophical thinking. What his radical version of pragmatism comes to is the rejection of the prospect of ever knowing the answers to the classical philosophical questions. Rortian pragmatism is a kind of throwing up of one's hands in discouragement with such tasks as learning what being *qua* being might be, what it means to be a human being, what is the relationship between human thought or language and reality, and so forth. It shares with other contemporary philosophical trends a distrust of philosophical ambitiousness—of grand philosophizing. And it stresses the belief that what we think about the world cannot be constructed upon something stable, solid, lasting within the purview of the world around us. There are, as Rorty has said, no "enduring constraints on what can count as knowledge, since we will see 'justification' as a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between 'the knowing subject' and 'reality.'"

Rorty's position may be appreciated by considering what he tells us about science and its ambition to give us an understanding of various areas of reality:

> On [my] view, great scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which any of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is itself.

What Rorty is saying is not altogether so simple as it sounds. In the way he uses them, the concepts of "accuracy," "description," or "the world itself" are nearly impossible to render clear. Yet he needs to make use of them to give expression to his extreme nihilism—even those who vociferously deny have some implicit commitment to the meaningfulness of the terms they employ for this purpose. In Rorty's case, as in that of others of the same bent of mind, it is difficult to see how those



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concepts can retain any stable meaning at all.

How did philosophy get to this depth of negation? To answer, we need to trace some of the steps from a crucial point in Western philosophy. René Descartes' turn to subjectivity, in the sixteenth century, gave voice, for the first time in a pivotally influential way, to a fundamental skepticism about reality itself. The only thing Descartes thought could be ascertained without doubt was the certainty of the existence of the instrument or faculty of knowing, the mind of the inquirer, nothing else. As he put it,

> . . . I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing this truth "I am thinking, therefore I exist" was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

For Descartes "the soul by which I am what I am—is entirely distinct from the body." So the only certain proposition we can know is about that soul or mind, which is the faculty of knowing. To put it differently, the *means* of knowing (reality) thus came to be regarded as being more certain than that which was to be known—namely, reality itself.

Descartes' epistemology became the first branch of philosophy; and metaphysics, which held that pre-eminent position for the ancient and medieval thinkers, fell into the background. For Aquinas, for example, the existence of consciousness had been secondary:

> The soul is known by its acts. . . . No one perceives that he understands except through the fact that he understands something, for to understand something is prior to understanding that one understands. And so the soul comes to the actual realization of its existence through the fact that it understands and perceives.

Before Descartes, metaphysics was largely taken to be the branch of philosophy that has priority. Under this assumption, the first task of philosophy had been the identification of the nature of existence, what it is to be anything at all, simply to exist, the basic nature of what our mind "understands and perceives" before we study epistemology, the nature of our understanding.

This was naturally thought to be important, if for no other reason than that when claims were made that such and such a being exists—God, angels, ghosts, atoms, minds, free will, sensations, feelings, moral virtues, political rights, the beauty of a poem or symphony—we needed to have some standard, something that could help us distinguish bogus from valid claims.

Following Descartes' radical concern with how certainty could be achieved, epistemology replaced metaphysics as first philosophy. From then on, most renowned philosophers (Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, et al.) concentrated first on the question of the nature of knowledge—of what it is to know and how we know. Even when they addressed metaphysical, ontological, or cosmological topics, they all felt the need to begin with epistemology. "Could human beings gain objective knowledge at all?" became the main question.

It is with Immanuel Kant that this trend came to true fruition, in a deep and fundamental philosophical skepticism. Kant claims that while we *may* know reality, it is always in doubt whether we do. This is not the ordinary skepticism that maybe we don't know things or we can't know things, but rather that *we cannot know that we know things.* It's the potency, the capacity of the human mind, to gain access to what is really real, so to speak, that is ultimately attacked by Immanuel Kant.

> Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. . . . We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge.

To gain truly objective knowledge of reality is therefore rendered systematically, essentially dubious. Although we may very well have a correct understanding of reality through the mediating innate categories of the human mind, there is no way ever to affirm or deny this. Whether we will have gotten it right is always up for question because we cannot move outside our minds so as to gain an independent place from which to compare whether the thing that we know and the knowledge we have match up. We cannot gain the independent place, cannot "climb out of our minds," to make sure the mind's contents match reality.



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That phrase is used by Rorty himself to affirm this skepticism about the potency of the human mind to know reality. As he states, we cannot "climb out of our minds" or find "a skyhook—something which might lift us out of our beliefs." By reference to this impossibility of the human mind to get out of itself and check whether it has gotten things right, one is left with a fundamental skepticism that has in turn led to a lot of ways of attempting to circumvent the problem.

Pragmatism was one of those ways. The pragmatic turn, as noted before, started with a frustration, a dismay with the failures of philosophical accounts to gain a clear understanding of just how the human mind—thought, language, words, ideas, images, memories—manages to connect to reality. This ancient objective has great appeal at the most practical level, because one thing human beings are always hoping for is to reach agreement on matters that seem to divide so many of us—religion, ethics, politics, aesthetics, and so forth. If some method or way or system could be identified that gave us a clear and dependable road to understanding things as they really are, then such agreement might be attainable, and a great deal of frustration, chaos, disappointment, acrimony, and even warfare might be avoidable. But the pragmatist holds that it's pretty useless to attempt to get such problems solved. The best we can do is find ideas, beliefs, theories, methods that provide us with workable or satisfactory policies. No correct, dependable comprehensive understanding is, however, attainable.

But, as to how we determine whether something works or whether the satisfaction that we gain is idiosyncratic or has something more universal going for it—pragmatism has never really reached a satisfactory resolution of that. And with Richard Rorty we get an outright dismissal of such a task. It is not important—not to mention that it is impossible—to answer such a demand. With Quine, we ultimately reached the point where the frame of reference that we use to interpret the world is supposed to be optional—not in the sense that at any moment we can just pick and choose whether we want to be process, substance, or event philosophers, but in the sense that there isn't any basic commitment that is compelled by the nature of things that we need to follow, that is necessitated. Instead, our adoption of a certain world view, a certain ontological perspective, is really conventional, gradually acquired, but not ever fundamentally anchored in anything that one can produce as decisive. This has been intimated in nearly every era. The early twentieth century already saw the promulgation of the view that, for example, logic is itself optional and we could choose between radically different "logical systems."

It can be argued that the current multicultural movement, according to which the Western way of thinking is simply one among several equally valid options, gained its main support in the alternative logic movement of the 1920s. Pragmatists such as C. I. Lewis proposed, in *Mind and the World Order* (1929), that logic is a matter of legislation. Ernest Nagel, a student of Dewey and admirer of Peirce, wrote his famous article, "Logic Without Ontology" (1944), which reaffirmed this view, following it up with his book *Logic Without Metaphysics* (1956). Quine subsequently made these same points about the indeterminacy of reality in esoteric and technical terms, so that what he proposed was largely confined to philosophical scholarly discussions and journals. Quine very rarely went public, the way Rorty has, to become a popular figure pushing this line of reasoning.

With Rorty we come to a point in the development of pragmatism where there is a frank, unapologetic admission of a sort of community-bounded way of looking at the world. The world is to us, always, never an independent being we understand as it actually is. The world is not in any sense *objectively* knowable, so that in commonsense terms, say, when I die, it will remain just as I might well have been capable of understanding it—that is, if I paid close attention and I did not indulge my prejudices or my preconceptions. Different communities or ages see a different world and if they don't, well, that is simply an accident, not owing to there being a world essentially the same throughout time and our capacity for grasping it as such. The way the world is (to one doing the thinking) is really a function of the community to which one belongs and the way the language that one has learned has configured that world. In sociology, it might be said that one's world is constructed by one's upbringing, one's history, and one's social circumstances. There is noth-



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ing universally true to be said. The central point is that the very words we use do not really represent reality. Here's Rorty on this:

On an anti-representationalist view [which is his], it is one thing to say that a prehensile thumb, or an ability to use the word "atom" as physicists do, is useful for coping with the environment. It is another thing to attempt to explain this utility by reference to representationalist notions, such as the notion of the reality referred to by "quark" was "determinate" before the word "quark" came along, whereas that referred to by, for example, "foundation grant" only jelled once the relevant social practice emerged.

The point is that the word *quark*, as the term *foundation grant*, is a social construct. The world is merely *the world as it is for us.*

It is not at all clear, of course, that Rorty has even managed to capture the best rendition of pragmatism. Susan Haack emphasizes this in her comments about what she takes to be the frequent caricature of pragmatism:

It seems that [we] may have made the mistake of taking Rorty's word for what Pragmatism is. Like Rorty, [we] appear to be unaware of James's distinction between "Abstract Truth and concrete truths," and thus misread him, as British Pragmatist F. C. S. Schilling did, as if his account of concrete truths were intended as a complete theory of truth. He is also, evidently, unaware of Peirce's harsh comments about "Mr. Schiller and the Pragmatists of today," who had, as he complained in 1908, "allow[ed] a philosophy instinct with life to become infected with the seeds of death in such notions as that of . . . the mutability of truth." Rorty blithely transmutes Peirce's definition of truth as that "ultimate opinion" that would survive all possible experiential evidence and the fullest logical scrutiny, into the grotesque idea that the truth is nothing more than what can survive all conversational objections, that "'true' is a word which applies to those beliefs upon which we are able to agree."

A scene in Michael Crighton's *Disclosure* calls Rorty to mind. In discussing whether one of the characters had been sexually harassed, a computer company CEO tells one of his employees that, to paraphrase slightly, "Hadn't you heard, truth is irrelevant, it is only information that counts today." This is given as grounds for why the employee making the claim ought not to press the charge but settle out of court. The point is poignant in part because those who hold this view are often also the first to decry sexual harassment and other contemporary evils. How one can hold out hope for making such complaints stick is certainly puzzling, given this attitude toward truth.

During the 1994 congressional election campaign, Rorty wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* lamenting that Oliver North may gain entry into the United States Senate, given how shamelessly he lied to Congress. I am not sure myself how guilty we should hold North. But what is odd is Rorty's complaint. How could he mount a good defense of his lamentations before a court of his own peers among philosophers? As a character on an episode of the television program *Homicide* once observed, "What is a lie when every man has his own truth?"

One more thing. Some philosophers in the Anglo-American academic community are anything but prophets of negativity and of human philosophical ineptitude. They, however, are not in the limelight. Mary Midgley in England and John Searle in the United States produce superior work aiming to give us understanding of the place of the human being in the natural world, of how our freedom is consistent with the best science bearing on understanding ourselves, of the nature of consciousness, of the complexity of language. Midgley writes beautifully, omits the jargon of the more technical works produced in academic philosophy, and by no means preaches philosophical nihilism. Searle writes with grace and passion on some of the most interesting philosophical topics and retains great respect for the discipline.

Richard Rorty, however, is the one who is now given major billing. What does this mean? Never mind the truth of his views, Rorty, a very bright alchemist, is picked, while what is needed is a superb chemist.



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# Señor Wences

JACOB STEIN

*Un bel di*, circa 1953, I was out for a stroll in New York City. My walk took me along Fifth Avenue, at the time the world's rialto. It was an avenue crowded with shoppers who were confident in the knowledge that anything money can buy was right there. Here was Tiffany's and there was Cartier's and Saks Fifth Avenue. As I walked along, my posture improved. I stepped with authority. I wanted to be accepted as an authentic member of the acquisitive elite. The overdose of materialism turned out to be homeopathic. I had the fugitive belief that I was about to perceive the substance behind this materialism, the continuity behind the transitory, and the laws that control who wins and who loses.

My general destination was Bartfield's Fine Bindings and Antiquarian book store on West 57th Street. In those days when in New York, I looked in on Bartfield's to check the stock. My walk took me past the Ed Sullivan Theater, the home of the Sunday night television show. The billboard identified next Sunday's performers. Among the names was Señor Wences, the juggler-ventriloquist. This brought to mind my own inept juggling efforts and William Hazlitt—William Hazlitt because of his essay on juggling and because of the tempting set of Hazlitt's collected works I saw at Bartfield's during my last visit.

As I entered Bartfield's I was afraid that Hazlitt might still be there. Could I resist again? With thoughts of Wences and Hazlitt and juggling spinning around in my head, I was a Bartfield's setup.

As I write, I see my set of Hazlitt's collected works in twenty-one volumes. It sits on its shelf, beautiful in its blue boards and black labels. Where will it go when I go? Perhaps back to Bartfield's. If it goes back to Bartfield's, it may well be picked up by an interior decorator who doubles the price and places it in the library of a client who likes books in shades of blue.

Last August I took down volume 8. It fell open of its own accord to page 77 and Hazlitt's essay "The Indian Jugglers." A reading of it explains why it was that the publisher, J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd. (London and Toronto), had the courage in 1930, in the depths of the depression, to print up sets of Hazlitt.

The Indian jugglers essay compares the uncertain success of intellectual attainment, such as writing essays and speaking in public, with the dramatic flair of astonishing excellence displayed by an Indian juggler keeping four balls in the air. Anyone can write an essay or make a speech and believe for the moment that what he did was pretty good. But can anyone try to juggle four balls, have them all fall to the ground, and still contend he is a pretty good juggler? With juggling and other such demonstrations of great skill, it is all or nothing. No in between. It happens or it doesn't happen. Flattery, positive thinking, or meditation cannot disguise the failure.

Hazlitt opens his essay by saying that the Indian juggler tosses two balls into the air and catches them. This is what anyone can do. The essay continues with what the Indian juggler then proceeds to do. He keeps up

> four at the same time, which is what none of us could do to save our lives, nor if we were to take our whole lives to do it in. Is it then a trifling power we see at work, or is it not something next to miraculous? It is the utmost stretch of human ingenuity, which nothing but the bending the faculties of body and mind to it from the tenderest infancy with incessant, ever-anxious application up to manhood, can accomplish or make even a slight approach to.

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Any miscalculation is fatal because

the precision of the movements must be like a mathematical truth, their rapidity is like lightning. To catch four balls in succession in less than a second of time, and deliver them back so as to return with seeming consciousness to the hand again, to make them revolve round him at certain intervals, like the planets in their spheres, to make them chase one another like sparkles of fire, or shoot up like flowers or meteors, to throw them behind his back and twine them round his neck like ribbons or like serpents, to do what appears an impossibility, and to do it with all the ease, the grace, the carelessness imaginable, to laugh at, to play with . . .

This past August I also saw television repeats of the *Ed Sullivan Show.* There is Señor Wences, in white tie, tails and boutonniere, introduced by Ed Sullivan, whose awkwardness sets off so well the Señor's dandified elegance. There is the head-in-the-box character Pedro, the insolent puppet ruffian, unintimidated by Wences's decidedly aristocratic condescension. And there is innocent little Johnny speaking through Wences's gloved hand. Wences uses the catch phrases, "Deefeecult for you, eezee for me," and "S'o.k. S'all-right," phrases that caught on as popular expressions at the time.

What had happened to this distinguished, restrained, highly talented man? I decided to find out. I put in telephone calls to reliable sources. I was given the good news that Señor Wences was alive and well and living in New York City. I called his telephone number and spoke to his wife. She said Wences was in Spain on his annual summer fishing vacation. The tone of voice suggested that everyone knew Wences spent his summers fishing in Spain. He would return in October. She volunteered that he was ninety-nine years old.

When Wences returned to New York from his fishing trip, my wife and I met with him and his wife in their midtown Manhattan apartment. Each room of the apartment has on display pictures, playbills, and various awards corroborating Wences's incontestable skill as juggler and ventriloquist. The following framed poem is dedicated to Wences.

Let's give a hand, to the Wences man,
he made it talk to me.
With a flourish here, and an eyebrow there,
*OH, the things a hand could be*
when I was ten, you made me smile,
with your head, in the box routine,
and the way you threw your voice around,
was the best I've ever seen.
So here's a tip of the hat, to you,
and maybe a hand or two,
for all the joy you've given us
with your ventriloquist revue.

In the sitting room are two portraits in oil of Señor Wences posed as the middle-aged continental boulevardier. They were executed by a distinguished Spanish portrait painter, Lopez Mezquita, who has work on display at the Prado.

There is surprisingly little change in Señor Wences's features when one compares these portraits with the ninety-nine-year-old man sitting just below them. The facial lines are the same, the face of an El Greco or Goya Spanish grandee: the narrow face, the aquiline nose, the searching eyes. Wences said that those eyes required only a few seconds to size up the audience, to determine whether the audience was warm and receptive or uninterested and cold. When Wences toured with Danny Kaye, he would signal Danny backstage about what to expect by giving a good-news thumbs up or a bad-news one finger across the throat.

Wences was born in a little Spanish town, Penaranda, located near the university town of Salamanca. He was christened Wencesleo Moreno. Wences says that two hometown streets are named for him. Wences performed his ventriloquism in the movie *Mother Wore Tights* starring Betty Grable and Dan Dailey. When it plays in Penaranda, Wences gets top billing. Wences is the hometown boy who runs off with the circus to see the world and later returns to be welcomed back as a hero by those who knew him in his youth. Life accords such rewards only to the lucky few.

Wences's first ventures in ventriloquism were the calls he placed to one of his teachers. He imitated his father's voice and told the teacher young Wencesleo was sick and could not make it to school.

In his teens he signed on as an apprentice at the bullring. With some pride, Wences reports that he engaged in three hundred bullfights. He described his style in the ring as "very quiet, very elegant." When he said this he paused and touched his left arm. He said



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he received a bad goring that required medical treatment. His doctor told him he must exercise the hand and arm in order to get a full recovery. This started him juggling. When his arm improved, he returned to the bullring.

In 1922, the Spanish Army drafted Wences and took him away for three years. When he went back to the bullring, he found that those he trained with had advanced in their careers and he was unable to regain his place on the ladder. He reluctantly gave up his real love, the bullfight, and joined the circus as a juggler.

My own interest in juggling began when I was fourteen years old. I saw a vaudeville act at the Fox Theatre in Washington, D.C. The juggler was assisted by a beautiful girl who handed him the clubs and the hoops. I drew the obvious inference that juggling was a way to attract beautiful women. When I got home I commenced practicing. In time I learned the rudiments of ball and club juggling. I still have two clubs made by Harry Lind, the premier club-maker of years ago. The Lind clubs are much heavier than the ones now in use. Lind gave a money-back guarantee. He would give a new club at no charge to anyone who complained of a loose handle on a Lind club.

Juggling, so Wences tells me, required him to practice hours and hours each day. It might take him a year of practice to move from four balls to five balls. And that practice must be combined with real talent of a high order to enter the charmed circle of the truly accomplished. Anyone who wants to make a living by skill and wit must get an early start. Any delay and you will find you are a prisoner of the conventional. The parade will pass you by, and you will be in class studying for the college entrance exams. (Wences entered that circle, and he has stayed in touch with the other star performers.)

By the late 1930s Wences had compressed into a nineteen-minute performance the years of onstage trial and error, the hours of practice and a discerning talent to amuse. He worked with Johnny, the little blond-haired boy who spoke through Wences's gloved left hand. To his right was Pedro, the head in the box. Pedro wants to get out of the box. Wences, as the ventriloquist, gives a voice to Pedro, a muffled voice in the box. As Wences slowly opens the box, Pedro's voice becomes clear. When Pedro gets out of line, Wences says to Pedro, "Back in the box," and Pedro's voice changes as the box closes. For no particular reason Pedro has eyeglasses and a moustache.

Wences told no jokes. The talking consisted of bizarre farcical patter delivered in an unusual, Spanish-accented, loud whisper. What was said sounded as if it should be understood, but just exactly what was said remained uncertain. Wences juggled the three distinct personalities—his own, Pedro's, and Johnny's. In this trialogue, each participant is wary of the other. All three suddenly grow assertive. And as suddenly they convert to an exaggerated and pompous civility.

The act exerted a peculiar appeal. Imitators such as Chevy Chase and Robin Williams did Wences knock-offs. In the movie *The In-Laws*, a banana republic dictator does a Wences imitation. Pedro appeared in commercials. In Egypt, King Farouk took time out from his debauchery to arrange a Wences command performance.

The relationship between a ventriloquist and the ventriloquist's dummy is a self-induced schizophrenia. Who is who? Erich von Stroheim, in one of the first talking pictures, *The Great Gabbo*, played an egomaniacal ventriloquist whose better side appeared only as the ventriloquist's dummy, Mr. Otto. In the 1978 movie *Magic*, Anthony Hopkins plays the magician ventriloquist; his dummy takes control and manipulates his master into committing a series of murders. It would take a Robertson Davies and another *Deptford Trilogy* to explore the full Jungian possibilities of the theme.

Once Wences settled on that nineteen minutes, he used it to earn a very good living for the rest of his long working life. There was no overhead. Wences talked to his own left hand and a head in a box. It was a ticket to the leading cities of the world. At one point Wences interrupted his travels for a seven-year stay in Paris. He paid his way by performing nineteen minutes, twice a day, at the Crazy Horse Saloon. What a treat for a dandy. Plenty of money, plenty of time, and the City of Light exposed to the contented flâneur.

As we talked, Wences picked up three well-worn juggling balls. He said his arthritis made it very deefeecult to do any more juggling. I took the balls and did some juggling for the master. He was mildly amused at my presumption.



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In the 1940s Wences was performing in San Francisco. His wife to be, Natalia, appeared on the bill as a dancer. They say they disliked each other when they first met. A year later they met again in New York. They decided they should make a life together. Natalia was born in Russia. She and her parents left Russia when Natalia was young, and they took up residence in Berlin, where Natalia studied ballet. When the Nazis took over in the 1930s, she went to Paris and joined the Corps de Ballet of the Follies-Bergère. She came to the United States with a dance troupe in 1934. Natalia is fluent in seven languages. She speaks English with a British accent. She and Wences prefer Spanish as their first language. Her bookcase has an eclectic selection of books in Russian, Spanish, French, and English.

Wences's career intersected with the television age. He became a regular on Ed Sullivan's Sunday night show where he appeared some forty-eight times. Wences began at the rate of six hundred dollars a performance for twelve minutes. As his popularity increased, he demanded and got seven thousand dollars a performance for that same twelve minutes.

Wences's career and Edgar Bergen's overlapped. Bergen's success with Charlie McCarthy brought Bergen generous contracts in radio and in the movies. Although Wences never achieved the popularity with the public that Bergen did, it was Wences whom the professional ventriloquists regarded as the more skillful of the two.

Wences recalls that when Edgar Bergen appeared at the London Palladium a few weeks after Wences, Bergen was not well received. Bergen's ventriloquism had none of the Wences virtuosity. Wences pushed the art of ventriloquism to extremes—he could smoke a cigarette, turning out smoke rings, all undisturbed by the spirited dialogue he was carrying on with Pedro. Wences's way of smoking his Galois was slow and dramatic, as Don José smoked his cigarette when he met Carmen at the cigarette factory.

Wences received his bookings through the William Morris Agency. Edgar Bergen received his through Music Corporation of America. MCA offered Wences substantial money to switch to MCA. Wences was suspicious of the offer. His suspicions proved to be well founded. He learned that Edgar Bergen would have used his influence with MCA to keep Wences away from any appearances that would reflect unfavorably on Edgar Bergen. Wences stayed with William Morris.

Bergen was aware that his success did not rest on his skill as a true ventriloquist. He relied on the best gag writers available. At the height of his popularity, he was a radio personality. Bergen had a comedian's sense of timing that was the envy of other comedians. Jack Benny, after appearing on Edgar Bergen's radio show, said he got so confused waiting for Bergen and Charlie McCarthy to stop throwing dialogue around that when he finally got to a joke of his own, he read it like a question.

The competition between Edgar Bergen and Señor Wences ended quite dramatically. In 1978 Bergen announced his retirement and performed for the last time on September 29 at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. When he finished his performance, Charlie said good-bye to the audience and to Bergen. Then Bergen said, "All acts have a beginning and an end, and I think that time has come for me. So, I think I'll just pack up my jokes and my friends and, as the days dwindle down to a precious few . . . September . . . November . . ." That night John Edgar Bergen, age seventy-five, died in his sleep.

This past December, my wife and I attended the Friar's Club dinner honoring Señor Wences. The guests included a number of Wences's old theatrical friends. They exchanged their thrice-told tales of days gone by. The cream of these jests was told by Tony Belmont, a musician and theatrical promoter. He held the floor with the following story.

When he was a young boy of ten or twelve, Belmont was a pretty good jazz drummer. He wanted to meet some of the headline jazz performers. An older friend suggested to Belmont that he could slip him past the doorman at the Metropole at 50th and Broadway, where the jazz musicians performed. Belmont would be disguised as a midget. They went to the Metropole. They got past the doorman. Once inside, Belmont is introduced to Dizzy Gillespie as a midget drummer. Gillespie asks Belmont if he knows the drum breaks in "Caravan." Belmont says he does. Dizzy points to the drums. Belmont takes his position. Everything goes well. Belmont is giving a great performance. He becomes excited at the sec-



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ond big drum break. In one of his violent jumps to get added percussion on the skins, his back hits the spring doors behind him that open to the alley. The doors spring open. Belmont falls backward into the alley behind the Metropole. The doors spring shut. Belmont gets up, cleans himself off, and runs around to the front of the Metropole to get a report on his drum playing. The doorman stops him. No kids allowed.

A few days later Belmont catches up with his patron. What did Dizzy think of me as a drummer? What did he think! Dizzy said you are the greatest midget drum magic escape act he ever saw. Can the stunt be repeated? If so, bookings in Las Vegas await.

Wences arrived at the Friar's Club at six that evening. The dinner party did not break up until close to eleven. Wences showed no signs of fatigue. He was treated with great respect by all in attendance. He appeared observant of whatever went on about him, but not engaged with it—a little aloof. Stories were told about him, but he told none about himself. He maintained the reticent pride of one who had found a way to use his stage tricks to play the picaro's trick on life itself. "Deefeecult for you. Eezee for me."

George Santayana had someone such as his fellow countryman, the elegant Señor, in mind when he noted in *Reason In Art* that the artist constructs a world of his own: " . . . nor is he concerned with the chance complexion of affairs in the actual world, because he is making the world over, not merely considering how it grew or how it will consent to grow in future."

Hazlitt concludes "The Indian Jugglers" essay with a tribute to John Cavanagh, a highly skilled handball player who, like the Indian juggler, did his one thing better than anyone else. Hazlitt describes Cavanagh as a player who was not "ineffectual—lumbering like Mr. Wordsworth's epic poetry, nor wavering like Mr. Coleridge's lyric prose, nor short of the mark like Mr. Brougham's speeches, nor wide of it like Mr. Canning's wit, nor foul like the *Quarterly*, not *let* balls like the *Edinburgh Review*."

I was present on April 20, 1996, to discuss all these matters with Natalia and the Señor at his hundredth birthday. As his friends looked on, Wences stalked, *capa y espada*, the elderly gentleman with the scythe. The Señor promptly dispatched his adversary, removed and tossed his white gloves to the table. In Pedro's voice he announced that he was departing for Spain to take up his annual five-month fishing vacation and he would see us again in the Fall.



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# Untold Tales

SOPHIE GLAZER

"Just sit in front of the typewriter for ten minutes every morning—ten minutes, exactly, by the clock—and if at the end of ten minutes you haven't gotten started, you can call it quits for the day."

So advised a friend of mine, a writer who wrote beautifully but very slowly, with decades elapsing between books. We were talking about those awful dry spells when you're paralyzed with guilt because you aren't writing; when you can't enjoy lunch with the children because you didn't write that morning; when you don't go swimming in the afternoon because you have to make up for the wasted hours in the morning; when you snarl at your husband in the evening because the day was a dead loss.

Nowadays people talk about time-management programs, but this was more of a guilt-management program. You might not do any more writing, but you'd shift the guilt from the entire day to one ten-minute stint in front of the typewriter. Instead of berating yourself for a whole wasted day—week, month, lifetime—you could restrict your guilt and self-reproaches to your obligatory ten minutes: eighteen hours of formerly free-floating anxiety now concentrated into one episode of highly focused commitment to get a few words onto that sheet of paper. Anybody can find ten minutes in a day—even people like me, who erect gigantic barriers of laundry and shopping and cooking, of paper grading and academic busywork, between themselves and that blank sheet of paper, who would rather scrub toilets and chair committees than have to face that accusatory whiteness.

And so I sat down to write. My typewriter and I confronted each other, and I pondered the thought of creation. I thought about Mozart improvising little jewels out of nowhere, and Shakespeare never blotting a line. I thought about Balanchine; I'd once been to a working rehearsal of his *Midsummer Night's Dream* and seen him effortlessly create a poignant moment out of a single gesture, as Helena walked in solitary grief through a wood populated by curious, watching, invisible fairies.

A minute gone, and I seemed to be on the wrong tack. How about the other side of creativity: the young Peter Martins, aspiring choreographer, sitting in an empty rehearsal room, his reserved time ticking away, wondering "How *do* they do it?" Flaubert endlessly rewriting in an agony of self-criticism; De Quincey littering the floors of rented rooms with stacks of unnumbered pages, till he was so snowed under by paper that he'd lock the door and rent another room. Probably all that opium got in the way, I thought, tempted nonetheless by the charming image he drew of himself in his cozy library in the Lake District, with his decanter of laudanum and his wine glass by his side. I stopped the clock just long enough to get myself a glass of Diet Coke.

Still eight minutes to go. What about Samuel Johnson, running his pencil down the lines of "The Vanity of Human Wishes," counting to see if he'd met his quota for the day; or Trollope, methodically putting in his hours between 5:30 and 8:00 A.M., before he started his day's work for the post office? No opium eating there, but something a little grim about that stern commitment to duty.

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When did they sleep? I thought of Roger Bacon, who made a head out of brass, a marvelous device that could answer any question, tell any story, reveal any truth. But Bacon slept through the moment of truth, and when he woke, the head had spoken, and the time had passed forever. An odd story, but with a certain suggestive resonance. The piece I'm writing (or, more precisely, not writing) is about family histories; there are a lot of blank spaces in it, where the custodian of a particular piece of family lore kept a tactful silence, or where the moment for telling came and went, with the tale still untold, the page still blank.

Only seven minutes left; the moments are definitely going. One of my favorite teachers had warned me sternly against waiting for inspiration to strike. I thought again of Balanchine, explaining that his Muse visited him on union time. I thought of Sir Philip Sidney—"Fool! said my Muse to me: look in thy heart and write." The fool was supposed to see the inspiring image of his beloved enshrined in his heart, but *my* heart, closely examined, seemed to be full of trivia about getting the laundry out of the dryer and making sure I got the girls to their dentist appointment.

Four minutes up: six more to go, and the paper still as white as white noise, as white as white bears, as white as a snowy street in St. Petersburg with Dostoevsky standing on a street corner trying not to think about white bears. I thought about Melville, who included the accusing blankness of a sheet of paper in his chapter on the whiteness of the whale.

Still five minutes. I thought of the scene in the movie *Bye Bye Braverman* when the writer sits in front of his typewriter desperately sharpening pencils and polishing his glass-topped desk. Or *Throw Mama From the Train* when Billy Crystal spends months trying to finish the sentence, "The night was. . . . "

I could write a book about *not* writing: *not* writing my dissertation (practically a life story); *not* answering letters. I once published an article about *not* writing a Harlequin romance, and got more mail from romance editors and agents than if I'd actually completed the manuscript. Another time I wrote my editor a note about why I wasn't going to review the play she'd assigned me; the note went on for three pages of vitriolic diatribe about a play which (I explained) I refused to dignify with my attention. My editor enthusiastically offered to publish the note instead.

Four minutes to go, and I'm thinking of the writer friend who first gave me this advice. I once tried to commission her to write a book review for a magazine I was editing, but she flatly refused because the deadline only gave her a month. I had been tempted to suggest that if she gave it more than ten minutes a day she might be able to squeeze it in, but refrained.

Only three minutes, and I'm remembering how earnestly she explained this system to me. I thought it was a riot at the time, because it involved sitting in front of a *typewriter* and she couldn't type. I think about writers and typewriters, about the Stephen King character in *Misery* who's captured by a demented fan who forces him to write a bodice ripper to her specifications; when he flags, she encourages him by chopping off non-essential parts of his body with a hatchet. The left thumb goes early, of course; you never need the left thumb at the typewriter. Actually, I'm using a Macintosh and laser printer these days, instead of my old Royal manual—could that be a mistake? Maybe I need more encouragement than the flying toasters on the screen in front of me. Maybe I need a battered typewriter, with a key or two missing, and a crazed admirer with a meat cleaver. Could I hire somebody to harass me? I think of Coleridge hiring men to dissuade him from buying opium. There are problems to that approach, as Coleridge discovered; your employees never *really* get tough with you.

A minute to go, and I'm thinking about deconstructionism (getting desperate, here); about all those seminar papers I've written where the emphasis is on what's *not* said, what's omitted, what's conspicuous by its absence. I think about the whiteness of a Malevich picture, the silence in a John Cage composition, the stillness in a Lucinda Childs ballet. The piece I'm trying to write is called "Tales My Mother Told Me," and I'm thinking about the tales she didn't tell, the things that were hidden, the times that had somehow disappeared out of our joint past. My writing ran dry at the point where I had to start thinking about the untold tales, and found that they had somehow come along with the good stuff.

Time's up, but I'm still sitting in front of the blank screen, thinking about mothers and daughters, thinking about mothers handing



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stories down to daughters. That's a good thought, a comforting thought; the careful reconstruction of a troubled life so that the daughter gets the good stuff and is spared the bad.

Mothers do that, after all; cut up the stuff of their memories, take the good parts, the pleasing, brightly colored bits, and stitch them together into a comforting quilt. But I find myself thinking about the other stuff, the times that seem best left unmentioned. You can't really cut them out—not for good. The bad stuff comes along with the good, and when the daughter spreads out that bright past and turns it over she finds a lot of surprisingly ugly material.

"Time is," said Friar Bacon's magical brass head. "Time was, time is past." And so it is, but I'm still here, thinking about the untold stories that somehow surface all the same. I'm thinking about family secrets and family lies, about unforgivable wrongs, unhealed anger, and that awful sinking feeling I get when somebody I love calls me and says, "There's something that I think you ought to know." I'm thinking about my writer friend who once told her little daughter a Grimm fairy tale, but told it in a version so horrifically authentic that at the end the child said sadly, "I wish you hadn't told me that."

The time is long past. I'm switching off the printer and sending the flying toasters home to roost. My ten minutes are up, and I'm in the clear for the rest of the day. The traffic on the information superhighway can thunder by while I fold the laundry and pick my daughters up from school. After school we have tea and cookies before we settle down to homework, and I tell them what I've been writing about. Dostoyevsky's white bears are a big hit; I parade them along a snowy street in St. Petersburg, rejecting a little regretfully an image of pink parasols clutched in furry paws. I add a slightly sanitized anecdote about the English opium eater and mix in for good measure a perfectly true story about my aunt who sleepwalks. I censor out the stuff about writer's block, and thoughtfully eliminate some of my reflections about mother-daughter relations. In the companionable silence of late afternoon, my daughters lie on the carpet drawing sleepwalking princesses and polar bears in the margins of their math workbooks. I listen to the stifled giggles of little girls not doing their homework and think about the tales I've never told them, and never will.



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# A Visit with Anthony Powell

## Time's Musician

JOHN S. MONAGAN

My first contact with Anthony Powell came as the result of a fan letter that I wrote to him in March 1969. Alone in my sister's house on a quiet evening, riffling through her books, I had come upon her paperback of *A Question of Upbringing*. I had started to read it and was instantly captivated. In my letter, I told Powell how excited I was to read this first volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, the twelve-volume cycle of novels in which it appears, and how much I loved its vivid characters and subtle humor. I was amazed a few days later to receive a courteous reply from him, which must have been written directly on receipt of my letter and sent by return mail. This punctilious attention to writing reply letters, mostly in inexpert typescript on light blue, airmail letter paper, I later found to be characteristic.

The impression that *Dance* (Powell's short name for his work) made on me was not only immediate and striking but one that remained. For me, a Democratic Congressman, nine-tenths of whose forebears were Irish, to be attracted by an Etonian, upper-class British Conservative would have appeared to be highly improbable, but it was his art that seized my attention and won my allegiance. I loved the spirit—cool, slightly detached, ironical. I loved the flow of words and the delicacy and exactness with which they were used. I loved the humor and the marvelous set pieces. I was grateful for the absence of steamy sex and tortured self-revelation. I was captivated by characters such as Uncle Giles, Widmerpool, Mrs. Erdleigh, and General Conyers. I enjoyed the technical versatility that moved the mise-en-scène from upper-class Mayfair to bohemian Soho and from military Aldershot to artistic Venice. I found it a welcome respite to encounter a point of view that was not blatantly liberal or wildly revolutionary, but I discovered value in some traditional policies and institutions without being hidebound. While by no means a "totalitarian," as he said, at the same time Powell found E. M. Forster's type of "old fashioned, political Liberalism unsympathetic" and characterized himself as "a great Tory."

I was in the Congress in 1969 and wrote my first letters on stationery with a Congressional letterhead, and I'm sure that this interested Powell and his wife, Lady Violet. (An American Congressman who loved books—fantastic!) As our correspondence continued, our friendship deepened until it became clear that our relationship was not to be casual, but permanent. At length, this exchange had covered twenty-five years by its last communication in 1993 and had produced more than a hundred Powell letters, which, with other memorabilia, I have given to Georgetown University to form an Anthony Powell Collection.

Both singly and with my wife, I have met Powell and his wife several times, but I remember particularly my first visit with them in Somerset in November of 1976 when I traveled down to lunch at their home, The Chantry. When I descended from the London train at Westbury, I immediately recognized Powell waiting on the platform. Short and slightly stooped, I noted his full head of gray hair, his up-tilted nose, and wide mouth. He was wearing a red, open-collared shirt, tan

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drill trousers, and low-cut, beige, chukka-type boots. We shook hands and moved down to his small, red car in which we set off for The Chantry.

As Powell drove nonchalantly through the rolling Somerset countryside, we straightaway established a relation on a relaxed and friendly basis. With disarming intimacy, he took the initiative and asked about my career, family, and present professional status. He spoke in a sort of drawl and ran words together in a manner that made it difficult for me to catch some phrases. Other topics were introduced: the Powell family in Ohio, General Grant's memoirs, the American Civil War, Churchill's recital of Whittier's poem "Barbara Frietchie" for FDR in Maryland on the road to Shangri-la, and the gaffe Powell made in his final novel (corrected in the American edition) when he had portrayed Stonewall Jackson's famished horde (described in Whittier's poem) marching into Fredericksburg, Virginia, rather than Frederick, Maryland.

Arriving at The Chantry, we rounded the drive and stopped in front of the semi-circular steps and portico at the entrance. Like one of Powell's heroines, Lady Violet, waiting in the hall, opened the door and stepped out to greet me. Dark and of medium height, with brown eyes and slightly aquiline features, she offered a warm and friendly welcome. She is a member of the famous Pakenham family and a daughter of the fifth Earl of Longford, a professional soldier killed at Gallipoli in World War I. She is a literary figure herself, an authority on Somerville and Ross and Ivy Compton-Burnett, and plays an active, if unobtrusive, role in the Powell operation.

Their house is a delightful expression of the joint Powell personality and they have given it the same affectionate attention that they have devoted to their writings. It is a work of art that blends wit and imagination. The structure is an architectural gem. Regency in style, it was built by wealthy mill owners about 1826 and was resurrected from neglect and decay by the Powells when they bought it in 1950. With its plain, rectangular, two-story, Bath facade, chaste portico, large, square windows, and facing of dun-colored stone, it exudes a formal, almost severe charm, although any severity is softened by the sly placing of a massive stone head of Caligula, the mad Roman emperor, at one side of the portico and a large columnar capital, saved from the dismantling of an Oxford building, at the other.

Inside, one sees that the Powells, as free-wheeling decorators, have here rolled in high gear. Wallpaper is one of Powell's loves, and the long hallway was papered with a black on mulberry red patterned paper. Set in a case was a hat of Charles I, while two large wooden, Portuguese angels were suspended over an archway at ceiling level above a large porcelain wine dispenser. In the dining room the Powells had installed a bust of Caracalla, the "enemy of mankind," and one of Antinŏus, the "boyfriend of Hadrian."

Ever the thoughtful host, Powell promptly directed me downstairs to the basement loo, decorated in a rococo style very much at odds with the restrained exterior facade. A spacious room with a large, transparent, unshaded window, it looked out at ground level to the fields to the rear. Its facility, with suspended water tank and hanging chain, stood in an alcove, sheltered by a screen, but without a door. A black, classical bust of Socrates rested on a pedestal nearby. Every inch of wall and ceiling, including the pipes, had been painstakingly covered with a collage of colored photographs of individuals and scenes clipped from magazines, travel brochures, and advertising folders.

Back upstairs, since I had asked to see the place where Powell worked, he led me to the second-floor bedroom that also served as his study. It was situated at the northeast corner of the house and, with large, multi-paned windows on two sides, was filled with light. It was decorated in a bright paper with reddish-brown and white stripes whose restraint saved it from being garish. The single bed had its head at the north window with a coverlet pulled up over high pillows and a pillow that had been worked by Lady Violet. The walls were covered with a variety of framed pictures, including photographs, drawings, and Parisian posters. I noted the original sketch that Osbert Lancaster had done of the maid, Billson, in *The Kindly Ones*, appearing in the nude before a shocked family group at Stonehurst.

Near the door, glass containers resembling fish tanks held collections of toy soldiers, relics of childhood recreations and evidences of Powell's interest in things military, a hereditary leaning of his family. To the right of the



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bed, with his back to the north window, was his workstation. His arrangements were surprisingly simple. He did his typing on a low table, at that time with a non-electric, portable typewriter, on which he composed directly rather than in longhand. On the other side of the table stood a companion low chair and next to that, under the east window, small tables bearing papers and materials. A bookcase against the east wall held what appeared to be older books and a variety of papers. This was the great novelist's atelier. No vast desk or worktable or collection of learned reference works. The ambience was simple and uncluttered but, because of the colors, not monkish or austere.

When I took my camera and started getting angles, Powell asked disingenuously if I'd like to have him sit in his working chair. I said that I would, and he sat, leaned back in a relaxed pose, and looked straight at the lens while I took shots from three different spots.

Back downstairs, we moved to the library sitting room for a pre-luncheon sherry. We entered a cluttered, comfortable room that was fitted with shoulder-high shelves crowded with neatly arranged books. Above the shelves, wallpaper with a pattern of contrasting stripes rose to the high ceiling. At left was a fireplace, on the mantel of which were set several exotic postcards (the Powells are devotees of *insolite* postcards), one of which portrayed a Delvaux nude with the message: "Whom does this lady look like?" Over the mantel and about the upper walls hung a cluster of oil portraits, including one of John Churchill, an ancestor of Lady Powell. Two easy chairs flanked the fireplace, while a Directoire chaise longue, covered in striped silk, closed the opposite side. As was true upstairs, large, rectangular, multipaned bow windows admitted a flood of light on the fourth side and permitted a view of fields and woods to the rear.

After serving sherries to Lady Violet and me, Powell sat on the chaise, swung his feet up at its base, and in what was clearly a habitual posture, like a male Madame Récamier, prepared for conversation. Socks with vertical stripes of beige and black that harmonized with the chaise and wallpaper showed above his boots.

We talked of Powell's wartime service and his liaison duties with the Czechs. The ablution incident in *The Military Philosophers* had actually taken place, he said. It involved Powell's eviction of Swedish General Asbjørnsen from his room, the only one with running water, so that lower-ranking Nepalese Major Prasad could observe his religious ritual. The Swedish general never forgave him, Powell said.

Powell took from a table a copy of a book on James Thurber by Burton Bernstein, which we discussed as an example of "warts and all" biography. On one occasion years later, Powell told me that he had met Thurber, then blind, at a Punch staff luncheon and was amazed at the skill with which he manipulated his food and cutlery. Our Anglo-American rapport was further solidified when Powell lifted from the bookcase Burke's *Biographies of American Presidents* and we perused with nostalgia the section devoted to (John) Calvin Coolidge of Northampton, Massachusetts, and Plymouth, Vermont.

Turning to his own works, I remarked that completing the twelfth and final book of *Dance* with its adventures of Nick Jenkins, its commentator, after twenty-five years of effort must have been a great satisfaction to him. "It was very much like getting out of the Army after the War," he said. "You were glad to get out, yet you found it difficult to adjust to peace-time conditions."

I was interested in the overall message of *Dance*, and while I knew that he insisted that each reader make his own interpretation and that the analogy based on the similarly named Poussin painting was available, I pressed him to expand on his rather oblique approach. D. M. Davin, the Welsh scholar, had appraised Powell's message perceptively, I thought, and I welcomed this opportunity to read Davin's conclusion to Powell.

Davin concludes: "The missing dimension in his [Jenkins's] world is faith, faith as a passion. And this is what makes the sequence, however amusing, so ultimately bleak. Under the comic world, . . . there is a tragic negation." Powell told me that he was prepared to accept this analysis.

Davin added: "True, there is a residual moral code, more observed in the breach than the observance. . . . So, we are left with a certain reverberating hollowness, reminiscent of the noise in the cave in Forster's *A Passage To India*." Powell said that he found some explanation for this point of view in Davin's Ca-



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tholicism, but stressed the belief that it was not for a writer "to give opinions as to his own work." It should speak for itself, he said, and may appear differently to different readers. He agreed with Dr. Johnson that criticism is salutary and did not object to it as such.

I then read him Davin's closing lines: "At least, the reverberation makes the sequence something more than a comedy of manners. We have been shown 'the way of the world' and it is not enough." Powell said that this was "not an unfavorable conclusion."

He made it clear that the adjustment to another medium had been less than traumatic and that completion of the magnum opus by no means portended a cessation of writing. It merely meant a change of form to his current concentration on his reminiscences, *To Keep the Ball Rolling*. He was then completing the second volume of these memoirs and finished the fourth and final volume in 1981. For Powell, this "straight" autobiography involved plowing new ground, and just as his readers had followed his transition from one literary form to another and had been quick to contrast the "imagined" life of Nick Jenkins with the "real" life of Tony Powell, the author himself had been fascinated by the differences in operating in the contrasting media.

On this subject, Powell said that his ideas approximated those of the writer X. Trapnell (undoubtedly there his alter ego), as expressed in *Hearing Secret Harmonies*:

> People think because a novel's invented it isn't true. Exactly the reverse is the case. Because a novel's invented, it's true. Biography and memoirs can never be wholly true since they can't include every conceivable circumstance of what happened. The novel can do that. The novelist himself lays it down. His decision is binding. The biographer, even at his highest, can only be tentative, empirical. The autobiographer, for his part, is imprisoned in his own egotism. He must always be suspect.

Powell said that he went to his desk every morning about 9:30 and slowly pounded out the words until noon ("appallingly hard work"), which exhausted his creativity for the day. He read a great deal for reviewing as well as for recreation, but his physical movement was increasingly restricted. He had found, as did Nick Jenkins, his commentator, that "in a writer's life as time shortens, work tends to predominate." His visits to London had become much less frequent, but he had made exceptions for special events such as the super-posh luncheon tendered him on the publication day of his last novel, where titles were a farthing a dozen and Lady Antonia Fraser—daughter of Lady Violet's brother, Frank Pakenham, Lord Longford—was a principal speaker.

Powell talked about his own writing and that of other writers with complete frankness and evident pleasure, and he and his wife discussed the characters of *Dance* without self-consciousness. It was fascinating to see how much a part of their lives these fictional characters had become in the quarter century of their creation. The couple treated them as if they were living people, and clearly they had their favorites. For example, I said that on the train from London I had sat next to an "ordnance" officer and that the descriptive word would appear to have a different meaning in our respective military establishments. Powell explained that in the U.S. military *ordnance* meant *artillery*, while with the English, it meant *clothing*. Turning to Lady Violet, who was quietly knitting, he said, "Stringham, you remember, was in ordnance—in the mobile laundry."

Nick's experiences in *Dance* closely parallel or, in some cases, duplicate those of his creator. Some of the characters are taken directly from life as Powell's memoirs make clear. When I asked about identities, Powell said that his wartime experience as a liaison officer with the Czechs produced the musical Colonel Hlava as the portrait of an actual officer. Another Czech officer, who was one of Powell's friends, did in fact return to the socialist motherland and did die of a so-called heart attack in a sanatorium. Powell and his entourage of allied attachés on their visit to Normandy did meet the general, who was clearly Montgomery, and the irascible Monty did threaten to "shoot up" any refractory Belgian partisans who failed to come to heel.

On the other hand, some characters are wholly imaginary. Sillery has been frequently alleged to be a portrait of an Oxford don named F. F. Urquhart, but is not at all. Others are erroneously considered by living individuals to be portraits of themselves. Powell's commanding officer took a character based on his second in command to be a rendering of him-



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self, but said reprovingly to the author, "You shouldn't have given me a V.C."

As we touched on the various characters of the novels in our discussion, Lady Powell asked me if I thought that Gypsy Jones was the heroine of *The Acceptance World.* Her question puzzled me as I had thought of Gypsy (later Lady Scraggs) as a scruffy and abrasive person. On reflection, I realized that the two principal men in the book—Nick and Widmerpool—had succumbed to her charms, and I agreed that in this sense, she might be so considered. "Nick later regretted it," Lady Violet said. Powell made no comment.

Powell explained that some of his material came from his own experience but was used in a different context. I had always been curious about the title of X. Trapnel's novel *Camel Ride to the Tomb,* described in *Books Do Furnish a Room,* and I asked him about its origin. He said that once on a tour he had actually heard a guide to the monuments in Egypt offer his services in these very words.

Writers and their problems fascinate Powell and he has always had definite ideas about what constitutes great writing. Although he admired him as a person, he doesn't consider Solzhenitsyn a great writer because the Russian did not put his material together in a skillful and artistic way. Perhaps because of military bias, he has refused to express enthusiasm for Ford Madox Ford (he says that Ford tried to pass himself off as a combat soldier when he was not). He believes Conrad to be a great novelist and expects his credit with the public to rise again. He weighs in as a great booster of Somerville and Ross, praising especially *The Real Charlotte,* and, after a period of initiation, has developed great admiration for Compton-Burnett. He is very favorably disposed to Kingsley Amis and V. S. Naipaul. His attitude toward Auden, as I later learned, has been affected by the poet's conduct at the time of the war. When he was told of Auden's death in 1973, he abandoned his customary quiet gentility. "I'm *delighted* that *shit* is gone," he once told Amis, "scuttling off to America in 1939 with his boy friend!"

Although he had once had a dispute with Graham Greene about a delay in publishing Powell's book on John Aubrey, they were good friends, Powell said, but he found Greene's books "perfectly unreadable." He failed to subscribe to what he described as the view of the British press, expressed at Greene's death, that Greene was "a good deal better than Shakespeare," but was in awe of Greene's "self-advertising capacities."

I knew that Cyril Connolly had been a contemporary and a friend and asked Powell if he thought that Connolly was one who, as some maintained, had never reached his potential. He replied:

> Not really. Actually, Cyril did pretty well in a quiet way. And one of his stocks in trade was the assertion that he never realized his promise. He was a very, very extraordinary person. He was a difficult person to describe. He had this very powerful personality. He could be an awful nuisance, yet people would put up with him. I never knew quite why they did. He had this enormous power—a fantastic power—of flattering you and he would exert it in an oblique way, even while apparently attacking you. He was brilliant in gauging how much one could take. He could worry you and make you cringe. He hated an equal relationship and always wanted to be on top or below. He didn't like equality.

Powell once told me of a luncheon at which Alexander Calder, the sculptor, was a guest, and "when the champagne was opened, Calder took the wire which held the cork and fashioned a little jumping man out of it. Roland Penrose, the publisher, our host, took it and put it in a cupboard, but Cyril got it and carried it away with him. It was very characteristic of Cyril that he got it away from Penrose."

Considering that *Dance,* with its kaleidoscope of characters, could make a great television drama, I asked Powell about the status of the proposal to put it on the tube. He said that there had been tremendous ups and downs since the suggestion had first been made, but that the producers never could make up their minds about how to proceed. There had been a BBC radio version of the novel in 1976 that had involved twenty-six forty-five-minute installments, which he found very acceptable. Finally, after all the backing and filling, last year, to Powell's great satisfaction, agreement by the BBC to film a TV version at last was reached, and the first section written by Hugh Whitemore has been completed, to Powell's approval. Filming is scheduled for late 1996, showing in early 1997. In 1995 also, a tape of the first three books of *Dance* was produced with Simon Callow, who



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played Mozart in the *Amadeus* play, doing the reading.

When I asked Powell his opinion of American authors, he said that he liked the early Hemingway and felt that *The Sun Also Rises* was a very good book. He believed that *The Great Gatsby* was a "great" book. He was fond of "not every word, but a great deal of" *The Education of Henry Adams.*

He said that it was absolutely impossible to foretell who would like his books. I said that my wife, an intellectual type, and my brother-in-law, a bluff, no-nonsense businessman, were avid readers, while my writer-editor son was only mildly interested in them. Powell said that he numbered among his supporters a taxi driver in Seattle, a barber in Oklahoma, and a twenty-year-old Colorado girl who, with her mother, had traveled to England to visit him.

When time came for lunch, we went into the spacious but simply furnished dining room that runs the depth of the house. Powell strode about with an earthenware pitcher of claret, whose contents he generously poured into large goblets.

Over the meal, the talk turned political. We discussed Congress and Parliament, their similarities and differences. Powell asked me what I thought of then President Gerald Ford, and when I said that we had party differences but that he was an honest and industrious yet not very imaginative man, he said that perhaps Ford was the unspectacular type we needed in times like the present. He made clear his Tory leanings, and from the strong joint interest displayed in Kennedy gossip, one gained the impression that the household was not impressed by Camelot and would not be a strong supporter of the senior senator from Massachusetts.

Powell's political views were based on gut feelings rather than on a detailed study of the issues. His leaning was toward traditional arrangements to the right of the spectrum. When I asked him what policies caused him to support the Tories, he begged off on details. "Writers talk such rot about politics," he said, in a welcome contrast with so many modern authors. He once told me that he was a tremendous devotee of Mrs. Thatcher and was several times invited to dinner at Downing Street during her term in office, but his admiration derived from her striking vitality and persona as much as from any specific policies. As an outsider, with apologies, he tended to favor the U.S. Republicans over Democrats, but added that "one should be chary about discussing the politics of another country."

I had recently read a book about Philby, Burgess, and MacLean and asked his opinion of them. "Burgess was despicable," he said, "even nice queers despised him. MacLean, however, was an able and skilled technician who had passed at the head of Foreign Service examinations." I suggested that "the establishment" had protected these people. He disagreed and said that it was the official stupidity of those at the Foreign Office who wanted to show that they were not stuffy and could put up with someone like MacLean, affecting to find him amusing when he was often disgustingly drunk and destructive at parties.

Powell said that many standards had declined in recent years, not least the quality of the publishing business upon which he depended and in which he had spent several years in various functions. He complained that getting out a book was now a long and tortuous process, adding that the manuscript of his last novel had been given to the publisher in February but would not be ready for the bookstores until September.

After coffee in the library, Powell asked if I would like a "walk around," and I accepted with enthusiasm. Glancing at my tasseled Bostonian loafers, Lady Violet suggested donning more appropriate footwear, so Powell and I went downstairs where we put on low, sturdy Wellington boots. He then caught up a set of yard-long clippers and led the way out and down the slope away from the house. We followed a well-defined, mowed path in the grass, past the converted stables where his sons stay when they visit, through the orchard of apple trees that he had planted, to the woods beyond. As we walked along, the reason for the clippers became evident, for he used them to clip branches and weeds that encroached upon the path.

Suddenly, and without warning, he led the way into a previously unnoticed, cavelike aperture whence, after clambering over a cluster of rocks, we emerged into a long-disused, overgrown, secret garden, enclosed on three sides by a high wall. After savoring my surprise for a moment, he turned left and proceeded into another rocky passage. We debouched at its end to find spread out before us a whole,



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surrealistic landscape of towers, pillars, and grottoes, stretching down to the level of the valley bottom, the entire scene bathed in a subdued, green light, created by the filtering effect of the living roof provided by the leaves of surrounding trees.

Immediately, I understood the meaning of the veiled reference to Conan Doyle's *Lost World*, which had been dropped at the house before our departure. Looking about, I thought of Yves Tanguy and Salvador Dalí, since the surroundings were reminiscent of their paintings. Everywhere, weird artificial structures had been created from the abundant stone. Cavelike openings appeared in various spots. Towers had been erected, and in an alcove rested a stone structure resembling a papal *sedia*. The halves of a broken-backed bridge had fallen to the ground, and between them purled a stream that ran from higher ground to a broad area of weathered boulders.

Powell revealed this architectural bonanza with the same flourish he used to introduce his fictional characters in unexpected circumstances. He explained that the structures appeared to have been built during a depressed period in the early 1830s as an American-WPA-type, make-work project to give employment to redundant local workers, especially those from the mill operated by the owners of The Chantry.

Moving out of the mysterious otherworld landscape, we continued our walk in more mundane surroundings and reached our turning point at the thick, bush-laden bank that rises to the limestone quarry whose explosions figure in fictional form in *Hearing Secret Harmonies*. Happily, its operations were suspended on this Saturday afternoon. From here, we mounted the path back to the house. We took off our boots and returned to the library, where Lady Violet brought us tea.

Thinking to find some common ground in our Celtic background, I asked Powell about his attachment to Wales and the Welsh that is apparent from the affection with which he describes the Welsh troops in *The Valley of Bones*. With my question, Lady Violet shook her head, raised her eyebrows, and glanced at the ceiling. "You are touching upon a favorite subject," she said.

Powell was a member of a family that had come from Wales a hundred years before, and he had set forth this lineage in loving, but exhaustive, detail in *Infants of the Spring*, the first volume of his memoir. This heritage was the basis of his pronunciation of his name as "Po-el." (You wouldn't make James Russell Lowell's name rhyme with "bowel," he said.) He valued his service with the Welch Regiment and was extremely proud of his heritage. He was so interested in the achievements of people named Powell that many years later he followed General Colin Powell's career with fascination; he placed a framed letter from the general in a place of honor in The Chantry hallway—the sole companion to the certificate of his designation by Queen Elizabeth as a Companion of Honor.

On Anthony Powell's ninetieth birthday on December 21 (on the cusp), last year, I persuaded General Powell to send him an inscribed copy of his memoir, and it has become a valued addition to his memorabilia. Another valued possession that he has worn frequently is a blue tie I had given him, which had the Welsh Red Dragons (Y Drad Goch) of Cadwallader superimposed on it .

The gift giving has not been all in one direction, for Powell has also given me inscribed and specially printed humorous or occasional books that have made local librarians' eyes bug out with envy.

We finished our tea and headed for the little red car, and as Lady Violet waved goodbye, we eased out onto the country road and headed for Westbury and the London train, where we said our farewells.

As I waited for the train, I concluded that Anthony Powell's ritual dance of life, as with that depicted in his novel series, was still very much in progress. He had developed his own style of life and had pursued his chosen profession so successfully as to reach a position of international eminence, with the acclaim of his fellow practitioners and the recognition of his sovereign. With his success had come the capacity to create a world of his own, removed from the hurly-burly, where, both physically and spiritually, he could live as he wished, faithfully attentive to his writing and devoting his leisure time to reading and entertaining his family and chosen friends in his uniquely attractive surroundings. In his personal life he had not plunged into the public controversies, sought refuge in drugging, rushed off in feverish travels, or struggled through the marital upheavals of a Graham Greene. He has



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lived happily with one wife for more than sixty years. He has seen no need to mount the hustings or get down in the sawdust as other men did. His concentration on literary creation left him no time for activities on behalf of the poor or downtrodden. Some might have found preciousness in his living as a Somerset mandarin, but he has suited his life to his interests and abilities and, while not one to rub elbows with the regulars at the local pub or to join a Sunday foursome at the links, he has made his unique and lasting contribution to letters and to humanity, and that has been sufficient.

# *Multiples of One*

NEAL BOWERS

Because the singular for deer is also plural,
the one deer the language allows is everywhere,
bounding through headlight beams
and browsing morning glories by moonlight,
not numbered like horses in their stalls
or dogs sprawled on a million porches,
but loose over the highest fences
and sometimes wild in downtown traffic.

E unum pluribus or if you've seen them all
you've seen one in the crosshairs
or humped by the side of the road
like so much meat, venison we call it,
making one food from the multitudes,
the deer standing in the garden, in the park,
hiding amid clothes hung out to dry,
breathing the singular air.

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# *MEMOIR*

# Ferrule

CHRIS ARTHUR

Like almost everyone, I picked up language like a dog running through a field of burrs. Suddenly, without any effort or deliberation, you find yourself peppered with words. The first one or two will be noticed by those around you. After all, they spend a lot of time throwing them, hoping they will stick. But soon they cover you so completely that their continuing accretion goes unnoticed. Grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary stealthily sink their hooks into the deepest furrows of the mind and take root there. A burr-covered dog will roll and groom until his coat is clear. Language clings to us unshakably, sending its tendrils to creep through us like ivy, finding some purchase even in the most intimate interstices of silence. So thorough is this subtle penetration, at once empowering and imprisoning, that it becomes hard to imagine what life without language would be like.

No exertion of memory can retrieve, intact and intelligible, the way in which we acquired this second skin of words. The genesis even of the most vital parts of our vocabulary is lost, hidden in that strange dead ground which occupies so much of everyone's biography—time we have inhabited but have no memory of passing through, our presence here, articulate and grown, the only evidence of ever having been there. Can anyone bring to mind that moment of epiphany when they realized they had a name, or when mute shapes on paper—mother, tree, dog, grass—first spoke the burden of their meaning to us? Who can remember when they first heard the sound of *genocide* and took into mind all the terrible dimensions of its menacing enormity? Or when the eye first met *redolent* on the page and translated its net of sound and sense into another gentle weapon in meaning's potent armory? Who can recall that subtle loss of virginity when the mind and mouth and breath conspired together to send the erotic vocables of *sensuous*, *lithe*, and *nubile* spinning into the realm of spoken desire? Such moments, however epochal, are lost as surely within our individual horizons as the first words spoken by Homo sapiens are lost in the dwarfing silence of prehistory.

Strangely, though, I can remember with complete exactitude my first encounter with a seemingly far less important word—*ferrule*. Perhaps this verbal burr was thrown so clumsily that I could not help but feel it landing on my consciousness, or maybe it came at a time when I was peculiarly sensitive to what it allowed me to feel and think. For whatever reason, its trajectory and impact have left an indelible impression.

My father walked with what he called a "drop-foot." This gave his steps a signature of their own, so that even if he was out of sight you could still recognize his approach along the ringing surface of the pavement that ran the full length of our street. Every alternate step slapped down harder on the ground than normal, sending out a simple two-beat rhythm: soft-*slap*, soft-*slap*, soft-*slap*. One of the few times I ever saw him really angry was when a gang of boys behind him imitated his footfalls. The soft-*slap*, soft-*slap*, soft-*slap* of his tune was almost drowned out by their crude exaggeration, a soft-*wham*, soft-*wham*, soft-*wham*, accompanied by raucous laughter. He rounded on them, a stern man in a rage, and they dispersed, startled that their simple parody had hit home so surely.

As children, my brother and I would sometimes wait for him to return from work in the evening, listening for his steps at the top of the street and then crouching behind the

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bushes in the front garden, giggling, our ears straining to measure his approach and time the moment when we would leap out in ambush. His suit always held the sweet aroma of tobacco and the smell of steam trains, which in those years still ran on the commuter line between Belfast and our leafy suburb.

Often his soft-*slap*, soft-*slap*, soft-*slap* was accompanied by the regular staccato tap of a walking stick. The handle of his favorite ashplant was polished by his grip. The whorls and knots of the woodgrain were like transplanted fingerprints. More than anything else I associated with him—coats, keys, cigarette case—the stick seemed somehow imbued with my father's presence. It was as if his heavy leaning on it had somehow transferred something of his substance into it. Whenever I saw the stick, I thought of the sound of his walk. The drop-foot was the result of a leg wound sustained in a German bombing raid on Alexandria during the Second World War. He had spent months recuperating on hospital ships and sanatoria in Egypt, South Africa, and England. Sometimes he would let us run our fingers along his right shin. We cautiously explored the six-inch furrow left by the shrapnel, felt the out-of-kilter bone, and were mesmerized by the damage flesh could bear.

One evening his rhythm was subtly different. Soft-*slap*, rattle-tap, soft-*slap*, rattle-tap. Later I found him carefully examining the tip of his walking stick. Seeing my interest, he explained: "The ferrule's coming loose." He wobbled the small brass cap which cupped the end of the stick. "Look, it's worn out." He showed me the tiny holes in the scratched metal of the base, worn wafer thin by miles of contact with the ground. "We'll get a new one on Saturday."

The shop that we visited the following Saturday remains one of the few really vivid images of place that I retain from childhood. We took the train "up to Belfast" as people always said then, as if the city were some sort of celestial region to which one had to ascend. From the grandeur of the station at Great Victoria Street (long since vanished into rubble), we walked to Cornmarket, part of Belfast's old commercial heart. My father's steps beside me, soft-*slap*, soft-*slap*, soft-*slap*, were a reassuringly familiar presence. Visits to the city were rare, and I was still awed by its bustle and scale, but thought myself too old at age nine to consider holding hands. He carried the stick but did not use it. Perhaps the rattle of the loose ferrule intruded a discordant note into the accustomed rhythm of his walk.

Braithwaite's (or R. W. Braithwaite & Son, Gentlemen's Accessories, Estab. 1887, to give the full wording on the faded gold lettering above the door) was old-fashioned even then. Its exterior was dull and understated, with a window display that in these brash days of self-advertisement would scarcely qualify for such a description. Inside it was dark and quiet and smelled of tobacco and leather. And always in the background, like some strange percussion instrument, the sound of wood hitting wood as customers tried out, or staff rearranged, the racks of walking sticks. My father and Mr. Braithwaite Jr., a man of about his own age, were evidently acquainted and treated each other with that mutual respect which is born from a feeling of knowing and being content with your own place in the scheme of things and feeling no inferiority to anyone.

By "Gentlemen's Accessories" Braithwaite's seemed primarily to mean belts, wallets, walking sticks, umbrellas, cigarette cases, pipes, and tobacco pouches. Yet, however genteel and dowdy the shop's appearance might have been, the vestiges of weaponry seemed somehow to cling to it indelibly. I had a sudden and irreverent image of the somber Mr. Braithwaite, decked out in skins and war paint, helping my father to choose a spear or club. The variety of sticks was staggering. There were scores of different styles and shapes, in woods of different colors and textures, ranging from knobbly blackthorns to the smooth ashplants like my father's. The handles could be plain or showy, straight or curved. Some were topped with bone or silver. And it was somehow impressively adult, evidence of a grown-upness I was years removed from, that my father knew of and was known in a place of such serious specialism. But more powerful than any other impression was astonishment that a word existed to describe the metal cap affixed to the end of a walking stick. It seemed to me amazing that there was a name for a device designed to perform so small a task as protecting the wood from damage every time it touched the ground.

Who had invented the object? Who had invented the word? Which had come first? Who had first said it? Why just that particular sound



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and shape, *ferrule*, and not some other? Since my father had introduced me to it, I had turned the word over in my mind and occasionally whispered it to myself.

Prompted by its strangeness, I had reflected on the mystery of language. Even within the modest lengths to which my childish vocabulary could carry such meditations, I was amazed at the delicate precision of naming and the enchanted possibilities that were opened up by talk. Standing in the sepulchral dimness of Braithwaite's, I thought of all the things that we have had to find words for and had a tribal sense of pride and belonging. I knew that I was being gradually initiated into the edifice of language that we have woven round our nakedness for centuries. (Not that, at nine years old, I could have found the right words to express such aboriginal sentiments.)

As we walked back to the station, my father's customary rhythm was restored: soft-*slap*, tap, soft-*slap*, tap, soft-*slap*, tap, over and over again as we made our way home. My mind beat time to each crisp *tap* of the newly repaired stick with a soundless recitation: "ferrule, ferrule, ferrule," as the word slowly sunk its roots into the loam of my emergent vocabulary and became something known and familiar. Soon, of course, after its first appearance had inexplicably borne on the back of its novelty one of those startling little revelations that dot a life with unexpected moments of insight, *ferrule* vanished into my word-store, only to be drawn out again at odd times, and then largely shorn of its strange initial numen.

Years later, though, it came back quite unexpectedly with all its potency restored. One day, some while after my father's death, I was sorting through some rubbish in the attic—books, photographs, old suitcases filled with the assorted oddments of a life—when, hidden in among some rusty golf clubs, I found his ashplant, cobwebbed and forgotten. It had long been displaced by crutches, then a wheelchair, and the rhythm of all our lives had been broken as my father's steps had faltered into illness and incapacity. The handle was still smooth and shiny from his grip, but the ferrule was loose and worn through, crudely symbolic of his final decrepitude (but then life is full of crude reminders). I wobbled it between my fingers and was taken straight back through the years to Braithwaite's, to the old rhythm of his steps, and to my discovery of the word *ferrule*.

I thought about all the ferrules I'd encountered since that moment of childhood awakening. For now I know that people construct all sorts of bolstering devices and affix them to their lives, hoping that the ferrules of name, occupation, wealth, writing will sheath their awful vulnerability, somehow clothe their nakedness and protect them from the effects of all the hard surfaces they must daily encounter. And in the aftermath of decades of violence in Ulster, I realized that the scratch and tap of ferrules had grown almost deafening. But their sound held none of the easy innocence of utility that had issued from the one that had capped my father's walking stick. These metaphorical ferrules served a darker, masking function, a shoring up of old hatreds, a keeping together of sectarian splinters that, without them, might have gradually worked themselves free and simply disappeared.

As I turned the stick in my hand and mused about the word, I remembered reading a romantic story once, where a crotchety old woman, soured by age and disappointment, is wooed back into the fold of life by a young friend. The point at which her rehabilitation is complete is marked when she abandons the stick that had become emblematic of her bitterness, planting it in a summer meadow bright with wildflowers and walking away unencumbered by it. Eventually it takes root there, green shoots spring from it, and, in the years to come, it blossoms and bears fruit. There was no such life in the abandoned ashplant. Its deadness, like the death we all must face, was unambiguously complete. No seed for blossom here, yet hoarded in its loose and worn ferrule, the little contours of its scratched and dented metal gravid with remembrance, lay a harvest of meaning richer by far than any merely happy ending.



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# *Fortress*

PATRICIA HOOPER

Ironing shirts this morning
I saw, in steaming air,
the shape of last night's dream.
A stranger carried me
out of the house. I didn't
recognize who he was
but felt his burning face
against my face. Disarmed,
I clung to that brief fire,
reached back for it dissolving
in daylight, though its presence
still touched me everywhere.

But now I've come downstairs,
sent children off to school
and washed my husband's shirts.
Now that they're safely pressed,
I understand the dream
not as a wish fulfilled
but prophecy: the chance
of order vanishing—
the mending left undone,
the supper spoiled. I've summoned

needle and thread, closed doors
against the April scents
grown restless in the yard.
So passion finds me, flares
as it will, as it always has,
and sleeping caution yields.
No wonder that Athena,
goddess of crafts and wisdom
and guardian of the household,
was depicted at Mycenae
not with her books and weaving
but a shield.

✪ PATRICIA HOOPER's poems have appeared recently in *Poetry* and the *New Criterion*.



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# No Failure Like Success

## The Life of Raymond Chandler

STORIES AND EARLY NOVELS. *By Raymond Chandler. Library of America. $35.*

LATER NOVELS AND OTHER WRITINGS. *By Raymond Chandler. Library of America. $35.*

ARTHUR KRYSTAL

Around the time a transplanted adolescent American was matriculating through the Dulwich College Preparatory School in South London, studying music, divinity, English history, and the classics, a peculiar American form of reading entertainment known as the "pulps" was just getting off the ground. Printed on seven-by-ten inches of untrimmed wood pulp, featuring sensationalistic fiction and even more fantastic ads, the pulps enthralled a nation of readers—or at least those who liked their women fast and their action faster. Had the youngster at the Dulwich School been aware of those first pulps, the *Argosy* (1896) and *All-Story* (1905), which soon called forth a hundred sexy and snarling imitators, no doubt he would have sniffed and returned to his Ovid and Thucydides, which he was reading in Latin and Greek. All this to say, it would have taken a wily Nostradamus to predict a confluence of those two events, whereby the product of an English public school education would one day place his stamp on a gaudy and lowbrow form of writing and make it, as he put it, "into something like literature." That modest, but not-too-modest, appraisal has now been shored up—one might say even raised up—by the Library of America's decision to reprint the works of Raymond Chandler.

Coming at a time when the distinction between high culture and popular culture is dissolving in academic saucepans, and when the time-bound views of fallible human beings, who happen also to be writers, are adduced to the detriment of their actual achievement, the Library of America's inclusion of Raymond Chandler presents an interesting case of these forces at work. Enemies of elitism will cheer, but because they are for the most part the same professors who suss out politically incorrect views in everyone from Lucretius to Lincoln, they will not always find Chandler fighting the good fight, at least not where African Americans, Native Americans, Jews, and homosexuals are concerned. Possibly none of these considerations entered into the Library's decision to set Chandler alongside Adams, Twain, Hawthorne, Melville, Wharton, James, Faulkner, Frost, and the rest. The publisher may simply have felt that Chandler's writings merit his inclusion among these literary eminences and acted accordingly.

This, too, presents a point of interest. Chandler, in case one is an immitigable highbrow and disdains to know such things, wrote fiction almost exclusively from the perspective of a California private eye; he also worked on half a dozen screenplays and published exactly five essays. Given that we are speaking of some two dozen short stories (many of them

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fairly weak) and only seven novels, the question must be asked: Does Chandler belong in any literary pantheon that is not restricted to mystery or detective fiction? Or put another way: Would a mystery writer at any other time but ours even be considered for literary sanctification?

Writers, mystery buffs, and even many educated readers of detective fiction will tell you that Chandler is a great writer, not a great *genre* writer mind you, but a great writer. Readers with less than a personal investment in detective fiction will shrug off such an exalted notion. Flaubert or Joyce, he's not. But he is a fine stylist, a craftsman who labored to fashion a prose style whose precision and panache, often imitated, has never been duplicated. The best of Chandler looks down on the imitations like an Old Master portrait hanging among thousands of pedestrian and slapdash attempts at emulation.

Of course, if you don't have an eye for these things, or a tolerance for the hard-boiled detective tale, you might not discern the difference or care about it—in which case, the Library of America's imprimatur will count for little. Skeptics, however, should note that Chandler, despite an ambivalence second to none regarding crime fiction, took his work seriously, believing he could rehabilitate a shabby stylistic cousin to standard English. The prose tradition he inherited—one finally shorn of its British roots—sprang directly from American print journalism and the story weeklies and dime novels of the late nineteenth century. And while it is true that the private eye's antecedents can be found in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leather-Stocking Tales* and in Mark Twain's pungent first-person narratives, a far more generative condition for pulp writing was the demand for plentiful prose delivered in record time—which, it hardly needs saying, tended to produce literary effects appealing to the lowest common denominator of reader. Ludwig Wittgenstein may have eagerly awaited his monthly issue of Street & Smith's *Detective Story Magazine*, but then Ludwig was an odd duck as well as a genius. In truth, few middlebrow readers, let alone intellectuals, ever gave the pulps a glance.

So along comes Raymond Thornton Chandler (1888–1959), Chicago born, Nebraska raised, and England educated, to give such writing a veneer of respectability. He did not alter general opinion about the pulps (they were pretty dreadful, and Chandler said so), but he did manage to take a genus of pulp writing, the hard-boiled detective story, and invest it with a rude wit and wised-up intelligence that made even readers of serious literature sit up and take notice. Yet in satisfying the reading public, Chandler would forfeit all opportunity of satisfying himself, for this was a man who, however much he railed at the "arbitrary" distinctions that separated "straight" fiction from detective fiction, would have preferred to go straight. In fact, his life up to the point when he began to write for the pulps might be described as the outcome of an early failure to become a serious man of letters.

Having prepared himself for a career in business after leaving Dulwich, Chandler qualified for a job in the supplies office of the Admiralty in 1907. He lasts all of six months. For the next two years he works sporadically for English newspapers, while writing poems, sketches, and book reviews on the side. In 1911 he manages to place a few literary essays in *The Academy*. A year later, unable to earn money by writing, he's had enough. With five hundred pounds borrowed from an uncle, Chandler returns to America, where after knocking around a bit, picking apricots and stringing tennis rackets, he becomes an accountant for the Los Angeles Creamery.

Enlisting in the Canadian Army in 1917, he sees action in France. Two wartime experiences stand out: he is the sole survivor of a German artillery bombardment on his outfit and, as a platoon leader, has the responsibility of leading human beings directly into machine-gun fire. The war over, Chandler returns to Los Angeles and begins a love affair with Pearl Eugenie ("Cissy") Pascal, a married woman eighteen years his senior. His mother drops in, stays on, and Chandler takes a job as an auditor for an oil company.

After his mother's death, Chandler marries the now-divorced Cissy (he is thirty-six; she, fifty-four) and quickly works his way up to vice president in charge of the L.A. office. The next seven years finds him working hard, drinking heavily, dallying with other women, and occasionally displaying erratic behavior. In 1932 he is fired. With nothing to do, Chandler again tries to write. This time, however, he eschews poetry and essays for the pulps



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because it occurs to him that he could write pulp fiction and actually get paid for it. Five months of work and he produces his first detective story, which is accepted by *Black Mask*, the best pulp magazine of the day (started by, of all people, H. L. Mencken). More stories follow, and in 1938 he finishes *The Big Sleep*, the novel that effectively launches his literary career and just as effectively prohibits a life in literature as he had once envisioned it.

Chandler's travails have been nicely recounted in Frank MacShane's biography, *The Life of Raymond Chandler*, which has the enviable quality, rare these days, of being both informative and brief. Without drumming the point home, it also suggests that, given Chandler's grounding in the classics, his youthful literary aspirations, and his unswerving romanticism, the fact that he ended up writing hard-boiled detective fiction was, despite his worldly success and its acclaimed brilliance, something of an intellectual cross for him.

From the moment he began to publish, Chandler veered from dismissive remarks about his work to rather grandiose pronouncements about how well it stacked up against the serious fiction of the day. Always contemptuous of mystery writers, especially the British "cozy," Chandler managed to convince himself that "murder novels . . . are no easier reading than *Hamlet*, *Lear* or *Macbeth*. They border on tragedy and never quite become tragic. Their form imposes a certain clarity of outline which is only found in the most accomplished 'straight' novels." Of course, if a critic gave too much weight to Chandler's own work, he was immediately suspicious. When W. H. Auden pronounced Chandler "interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of a criminal milieu," Chandler demurred: "Auden leaves me lost and groping. . . . I'm just a fellow who jacked up a few pulp novelettes into book form." Not to like his work was to misunderstand it; to like it too much, ditto. "The better you write a mystery," he informed his London publisher, "the more clearly you demonstrate that the mystery is not really worth writing."

The sense of doing something well that may not be worth doing at all never left him. He couldn't let it because—well, because he had a classical education and knew that *it*, at least, was worth something. In a phrase, the same education that enabled him to write clean, economical sentences made him painfully ambivalent toward the form in which they appeared. He saw himself writing detective fiction much as an architect might feel if forced to design useless, elaborate boxes. Hard-boiled narrative was a species of arcana to be examined and learned from; he analyzed, parsed, imitated, and revised repeatedly, teaching himself to write pulp stories, as MacShane notes, "in the same spirit as translating Cicero into English and then back into Latin"—just as he had done at Dulwich.

The other difference between Chandler and even competent pulp writers was an ear trained in Edwardian England. "I had to learn American just like a foreign language," he said, and certainly that played into the hands of a writer who believed that "the most durable thing in writing is style, and style is the most valuable investment a writer can make with his time." From the outset, Chandler thought he could do things with detective fiction that readers didn't even know they wanted. "They just *thought* they cared nothing about anything but the action," he claimed. "The things they really cared about, and that I cared about, were the creation of emotion through dialogue and description; the things they remembered, that haunted them, were not for example that a man got killed, but that in the moment of his death he was trying to pick a paper-clip up off the polished surface of a desk." Much the same point, incidentally, is made in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* when studio executive Monroe Stahr, using a nickel rather than a paper clip, expatiates on the art of writing for the movies.

Like its maker, Chandler's famous style contains an inherent contradiction. Although he admired Dashiell Hammett for giving murder back to the nasty, impulsive people who commit it and who "talk and think in the language they customarily used for such purposes," Chandler was not about to get realistic. Hammett, though no stranger to gothic plotting, wrote matter-of-factly. But then Hammett was the real article—he'd been a Pinkerton detective and hung out with cops and robbers, saloon owners and such—and perhaps felt no need to embellish. Chandler, on the other hand, learned about criminals from newspapers, textbooks, and the pulps. Both physically and temperamentally removed from the rough-



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and-tumble, he had to find a way to get himself interested in writing about it: "How could I possibly care a button about the detective story as a form?" he explained to the editor of *Harper's*. "All I'm looking for is an excuse for certain experiments in dramatic dialogue. To justify them I have to have plot and situation; but fundamentally I care almost nothing about either. All I really care about is what Errol Flynn calls 'the music,' the lines he has to speak."

Chandler was not being disingenuous, but music was not all he cared about. He would also claim with typical contrariety that had essays paid enough, he would have given up fiction altogether. One may doubt it; fiction freed him—his character Philip Marlowe freed him—to sing of chivalric quests and fantasy (this, after all, was a writer who never quit dabbling with poetry or fabulistic tales); at the same time, Marlowe also enabled him to express the bitterness and disillusionment of a man coming to maturity in the period between the wars.

One forgets that Chandler was part of the lost generation, one of the writers who emerged from the trenches intact in limb only. "A sense of wrong" pervades his writings, observes Jacques Barzun, a conviction that "society, mankind is corrupt—all but a few scattered individuals." So Marlowe becomes society's antithesis, the embodiment of resistance to the temptations of money, power, and flesh—the one incorruptible individual.

Much as one is tired of seeing Chandler's famous definition of the detective reprinted, and much as one would like to forgo any mention of it, it can't be done. Marlowe is the Hamlet of private eyes, not only because more has been written about him than about any other shamus, or because he is cynical, sentimental, and even on occasion somewhat hysterical on the subject of women, but because we think we know him better than he knew himself.

> But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. . . . He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and common man and yet an unusual man . . . if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things. He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. . . . He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness.

In short, the detective is Chandler without Chandler's annoying personal failings. It is unthinkable that Marlowe could give in to despair, behave dishonorably, contemplate suicide, or make a fool of himself over women (that was the province of his creator). Nothing fazes him, nothing can humiliate him, and, like Sam Spade before him, Marlowe won't "play the sap," not even for the woman he loves. Which of course is what appeals to the sap in all men who must knuckle under to girlfriends, wives, or employers. Marlowe's refusal to compromise is embodied in the very language used against those who attempt to diminish him; words themselves become a mode of resistance, a verbal sock to the jaw.

The wrongness of Chandler's world is thus kept at bay by the brusque, evocative language of the books, a style that Fredric Jameson equates with an underlying attitude of distrust, "a kind of outgoing belligerence, or hostility, or the amusement of the native. . . ." And whenever Chandler's dialogue strays into "something more intimate and more expressive, it begins to falter; for his forte is the speech pattern of inauthenticity, of externality, and derives immediately from the inner organic logic of his material itself."

> Did I hurt your head much?
> You and every other man I ever met.
>
> I don't like your manner.
> That's all right. I'm not selling it.
>
> Who's your buddy?
> Big Willie Magoon. He thinks he's tough.
> You mean he isn't sure?

No less important than the attitude is the lonely figure of Marlowe himself. Certainly a large part of the books' appeal lies in the curious vulnerability of this wisecracking detective. Although the detective's solitary existence is now part of the American scene, even something of a cliché, there is something special about Marlowe—perhaps because his voice is filtered through Chandler's own deep-



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rooted loneliness and insecurity—that still tugs at us. "I think he will always have a fairly shabby office, a lonely house, a number of affairs but no permanent connection," Chandler mused. "I see him in a lonely street, in lonely rooms, puzzled, but never quite defeated."

Ever present but not stifling, Marlowe's loneliness tempers his cynicism and wit, and we read his first-person reports with a degree of sympathy we reserve for people we would like to have as a friend. And of course we approve of his way with words. Just about everyone likes to quote from the first page of *Farewell, My Lovely*: "Even on Central Avenue, not the quietest dressed street in the world, he looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food." That's fun to read, but there are any number of other passages that do their jobs so smoothly you almost miss them going by:

> You could know Bay City a long time without knowing Idaho Street. And you could know a lot of Idaho Street without knowing Number 449. The block in front of it had a broken pavement that had almost gone back to dirt. The warped fence of a lumberyard bordered the cracked sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. Halfway up the block the rusted rails of a spur track turned in to a pair of high, chained wooden gates that seem not to have been opened for twenty years. Little boys with chalk had been writing and drawing pictures on the gates and all along the fence.
>
> —*The Little Sister*

As for the wisecracks and similes, Clive James, for one, can't get over Chandler's description of a blonde, sexy enough "to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained glass window." Others may prefer the small, seedy touches: "There was a desk and a night clerk with one of those mustaches that gets stuck under your fingernail." Five bullets pumped into a stomach make "no more sound than fingers going into a glove," and a hungover middle-aged woman's voice drags "itself out of her throat like a sick man getting out of bed."

Not everyone is impressed by this. The late Kingsley Amis found a moral pretentiousness in Marlowe that was underlined by a corresponding stylistic pretentiousness. Of the big three—Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane—Amis preferred the last: "Few novelists on any level can match Spillane's skill in getting his essential facts across palatably and without interrupting the action." Arrant nonsense, of course. Bad writing by itself is sufficient to stop the action, and Spillane is 95 percent bad writing. In Amis's preference for honest bad writing over attempts to ennoble or solemnize the hard-boiled genre, there is a perverse snobbism at work; like some Regency aristocrat, Amis disdains middle-class pastimes for the low amusement of bare-knuckle boxing.

Chandler is also not a favorite of writers such as James Ellroy, who himself tends to write dark, brooding crime tales in a staccato, hyperventilated mode. "I see hardboiled crime fiction as a heavily ritualized transit horseshit and largely spun off of Raymond Chandler. . . . [He] is a very easy writer to imitate, which is why so many people have been able to adapt his formula with such success, but I hate that formula, and I hate its sensibility." More nonsense. Hating Chandler's sensibility is one thing, but he is almost impossible to imitate. There has been precious little good tough-guy detective fiction written since Chandler's day—James Crumley's *The Last Good Kiss*, Andrew Bergman's *The Big Kiss-Off of 1944*, and Timothy Harris's *Kyd for Hire* spring to mind—but the vast majority of these books, and there have been plenty, is awful stuff indeed. What's astonishing is not the poor quality of the imitations but that Chandler has not spoiled more readers. You'd think that people, reviewers included, could discern the difference between chuck and prime, speaking of which S. J. Perelman's parody "Farewell, My Lonely Appetizer" reminds us that good hard-boiled fare is more than just a matter of gats and gams.

Of greater significance than divided opinion is the number of serious critics who paid attention to Chandler's work long before there was anything like Popular Culture Studies: Auden, Maugham, Barzun, Edmund Wilson, Jameson, Geoffrey H. Hartman. Now, of course, when everything from billboards to court records is seen to possess stores of social and semiotic relevance, the hard-boiled formula, so writes one specialist, "constitutes an escape from the full implications of the modern naturalistic moral universe . . . an escape from the naturalistic consciousness of determinism and meaningless death just as it em-



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bodies a flight from the other-directed anxiety about success and conformity." All this may be so, but why train a howitzer on a birdhouse when a firecracker will do as well?

One thing the popular culturalists do get right is the role of the city in these stories, though they are not the first to have noticed. Back in 1902 G. K. Chesterton found the detective story to be "the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life. . . . No one can have failed to notice that in these stories the hero or the investigator crosses London with something of the loneliness and liberty of a prince in a tale of elfland."

I don't wish to dispute the mind that created the mind of Father Brown, but an addendum is in order. While Auguste Dupin may have pounded the Parisienne pavements looking for purloined letters and bad-tempered orangutans, and Sherlock Holmes fraternized with the denizens of London's underclass, it is only when the upper-class investigator metamorphoses into the private eye that the detective truly becomes one with the city. It is no accident that the first private eyes—John Carroll Daly's Race Williams and Hammett's Continental Op—emerge at a time when city governments were intent on collecting power, and racketeers on collecting city governments. In the 1920s American cities had become, in Auden's phrase, the "Great Wrong Place," open all night and to all social classes, the perfect place to hide missing heiresses, misfits, and murderers.

As students of the mystery genre know, murder in the country was a snake in the garden, a disruption of the pastoral order, whereas violence in cities was the natural order. In the countryside, with its rigid class structure, the victim and the executioner were often related, while in the anonymous urban landscape, in which people were free to reinvent themselves, murder occurred as a by-product or accident, victim and murderer often strangers. The right man in the Wrong Place was the peeper, gumshoe, dick, a man able to ferret out secrets and past identities, a man for whom neither the city's glamour nor its sordidness could hide the naked ambitions, faded hopes, elaborate lies, or the corruption that stretched from the slums to the mansions on the hill.

We curved through the bright mile or two of the Strip, past the antique shops with famous screen names on them, past the windows full of point lace and ancient pewter, past the gleaming new night clubs with famous chefs and equally famous gambling rooms, run by polished graduates of the Purple Gang, past the Georgian-Colonial vogue, now old hat, past the handsome modernistic buildings in which the Hollywood flesh-peddlers never stop talking money. . . . Past all this and down a wide smooth curve to the bridle path of Beverly Hills and lights to the South, all colors of the spectrum and crystal clear in an evening without fog, past the shadowed mansions up on the hills to the north, past Beverly Hills altogether and up into the twisting foothill boulevard and the sudden cool dusk and the drift of wind from the sea.

—*Farewell, My Lovely*

Although this passage is coated with a residue of *Gatsby*-like lushness, it is good writing in anyone's book, and there is enough of it throughout Chandler's novels to warrant Auden and Co. to think more of Chandler's work than he did himself. And while *The High Window* and *The Little Sister* are marred by overplotting and digressions, and parts of *The Long Goodbye* are too long by half, most of Chandler's fiction remains fresh and funny fifty years after its creation.

Chandler, in my experience, was the only writer of thrillers whose novels literary types and intellectuals could read above the bedcovers. Yet no matter how much we liked him, we still didn't know where he fit in. In short, we felt the same ambivalence toward his work that Chandler himself and such subtle critics as Desmond MacCarthy also felt. But if there is less to Chandler than the popular culturalists would have us believe, there is probably more to him than dismissive highbrows would like to believe. And what both often miss is the sheer good humor of the writing, especially in the stories and early novels, which include scenes bordering on self-parody, as well as dialogue that only a man enjoying himself could write.

The kid said: "I don't like drunks in the first place, and in the second place I don't like them getting drunk in here, and in the third place I don't like them in the first place."

"Warner Brothers could use that," I said.

"They did."



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Like many another certified melancholic—Swift and Dr. Johnson to name two—Chandler depended on humor and a sense of the grotesque to get by. Marlowe's voice was the work of a particular mood: irreverence, impudence, and gusto combining to produce the deft descriptions, outrageous similes, and bright repartee that constitute Chandler's narrative at its best.

But no matter how good the writing, and Chandler knew when it was good, nothing could shake the conviction that he was working not only in a mediocre field but in a foreign one as well. A point poignantly brought home when Alfred Knopf sent him a book by Max Beerbohm: "I found it sad reading," Chandler wrote back. "It belongs to the age of taste, to which I once belonged. It is possible that like Beerbohm I was born half a century too late, and that I too belong to an age of grace. I could so easily have become everything the world has no use for. So I wrote for *Black Mask*. What a wry joke."

After the success of *The Big Sleep*, Chandler followed up with *Farewell, My Lovely*, possibly the purest of Chandler's novels in plotting, humor, and snappy dialogue, and which even Edmund Wilson, who flared his fastidious nostrils at the detective story, conceded contained good writing. Did this make Chandler happy? Of course not. Wilson was just "a fat bore" who in the *Memoirs of Hecate County* had managed to make "fornication as dull as a railroad time table."

Other than Cissy, very little seemed to perk Chandler up. And Cissy was growing old, making the age difference between them increasingly evident. Nor did his disposition improve when he began working for the movie studios in 1943. His collaboration with Billy Wilder on the screenplay of *Double Indemnity* and with Alfred Hitchcock on *Strangers on a Train* turned out to be unpleasant experiences for all involved. Bad times and good money is a recipe for boozing, and Chandler's health began to fail. By 1949 he was suffering from bronchitis, skin allergies, and shingles—ailments that would all become chronic.

At this point, Cissy also developed respiratory problems and was in and out of hospitals. Somehow Chandler managed to finish *The Long Goodbye*, certainly the most somber and affecting of his books, while worrying over and ministering to his aged wife. When Cissy died in the winter of 1954, Chandler was distraught. To his London publisher Hamish Hamilton, he wrote: "For thirty years, ten months and four days, she was the light of my life, my whole ambition. Anything else I did was just the fire for her to warm her hands at. That is all there is to say."

Although Chandler would live another four and a half years, he never truly recovered from his wife's death. At loose ends, he traveled back and forth between America and England, taking up with various women who he decided needed looking after. Self-pity and nostalgia envelop him; gusto and impudence take a holiday, and his last novel, *Playback*, is a testament to depression. The tone is wrong: personal without being real (as if Chandler and Marlowe are vying for control) and in a form intrinsically artificial, it is sincerity that rings false. "How can such a hard man be so gentle?" the heroine asks. To which Marlowe replies: "If I wasn't hard, I wouldn't be alive. If I couldn't ever be gentle, I wouldn't deserve to be alive." Irresistible stuff to adolescent males perhaps, but does it play when one has seen and read a bit more?

The end of Chandler's life was a sad business. His drinking again assumed heroic proportions, leading to the same erratic behavior that had marked his days in the oil business. He behaved badly with friends and publishers, trusted people he had no business trusting, and became infatuated with Natasha Spender (the poet's wife), then his own secretary, and finally his British agent Helga Greene. While engaged to Greene, Chandler, still drinking heavily, developed pneumonia. He died on March 26, 1959. Seventeen people attended the funeral.

Although a writer's work is not a stencil placed over the life, the dichotomy is always starkest when the work centers on a fictional alter ego who seems to compensate for everything the writer is not. Readers familiar only with the novels may thus find Chandler's sensibility, as expressed in the letters, something of a surprise. Chandler's no-nonsense insights into his own and others' books show a mind relentlessly at work, expostulating on writing, explaining his own designs, complaining when critics missed the point. No other genre writer, I suspect, took such pains both to justify the work and to distance himself from it.



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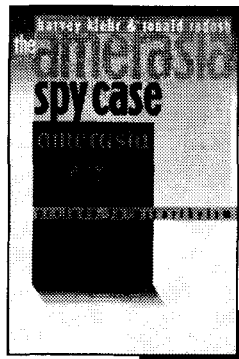


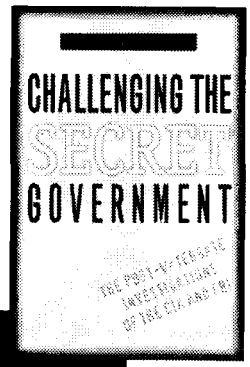


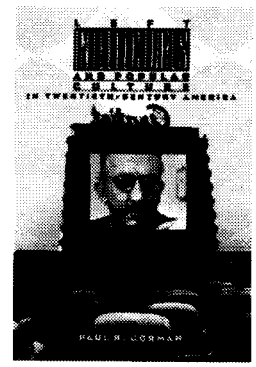

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To read the letters is to realize that letters were as necessary to Chandler as fiction; that, in fact, one reason he wrote letters was to differentiate himself from that fellow who wrote detective novels. For it was in the letters that Chandler finally became what he had always aspired to—that is to say, a man of letters.

This is not lost on his biographer. His letters, MacShane notes, "are like the conversation of a man sitting by the fireplace, pondering and exploring everything he could not encompass in his fiction." Sadly, few of these letters were to intimates or to other writers. They were prompted by publishers, editors, or strangers asking for advice or clarification. But they are personal in the best sense. Chandler seemed to communicate fearlessly, without thought of embarrassment to himself or his correspondent. The letters are thoughtful, defensive, cranky, naïve, occasionally pompous, yet always intelligent, always honest. If at times he comes off like a schoolmaster or peevish owl, how admirable then that the owl should have created such a believable eagle!

No, Chandler was not Marlowe, and that's the beauty of it. For readers, anyway. Authors, however, must suffer their creations when they enter the popular mind, as Arthur Conan Doyle learned to his dismay. Inevitably compared to his Baker Street detective, Doyle, on one occasion at least, got off a fine retort: "Pray get this into your cerebral tentacle: the doll and its maker are seldom identical." Chandler, responding to similar probing, took a different tack: "Yes, I am exactly like the characters in my books," he wrote. "I am very tough and have been known to break a Vienna roll with my bare hands. I am very handsome, have a powerful physique, and I change my shirt regularly every Monday morning. . . . I am thirty-eight years old and have been for the last twenty years. I do not regard myself as a dead shot, but I am a pretty dangerous man with a wet towel. But all in all I think my favorite weapon is a twenty dollar bill."

A man with a droll sense of humor is quite often a man with a sense of fair play, apt to recognize his own foibles and to find humor in them. So what do we make of Marlowe's labeling of homosexuals and non-Caucasians as "nigger," "shine," "dinge," "Mex," "Jap," "wetback," "fag," and "queer"? The first thing to say is that they pop up less often than some critics would have it; and second, if you don't allow a writer to be a man of his time, you're not giving him room to be a writer at all.

Was Chandler a bigot? He was certainly insensitive in his choice of words, but then these were the words that best conveyed how the people he wrote about spoke. Being fond of England did not stop him from dropping a "limey" now and then. But what do we make of "fat greasy sensual Jew" or "a big burly Jew with a Hitler mustache"? Clearly, this is anti-Semitism delivered with an almost casual effrontery. But is it? When confronted, Chandler stood his ground: "I demand the right to call a character called Weinstein a thief without being accused of calling all Jews thieves." A member of the Hollywood community, Chandler knew his fair share of Jews and obviously had thought about them.

> They want to be like everyone else, undistinguishable from everyone else, except that they want to be Jews to themselves, and they want to be able to call non-Jews by the name of Gentiles. But even then they are not happy, because they know very well you can't insult a man by calling him a Gentile, whereas you can insult him by calling him a Jew. As long as this is so I don't see how you can expect the Jews not to be oversensitive, but at the same time I don't see why I should be so unnaturally considerate of this oversensitiveness as never to use the word Jew.

The last word on the subject should not be words but actions: while living in La Jolla, Chandler refused to join the local country club. Why? Because it was restricted.

The question always comes back, as it must, to one of gravitas. It was *the* question in Chandler's life, a question that gnawed at him until the end:

> People are always suggesting to writers of my sort, "You write so well why don't you attempt a serious novel." By which they mean Marquand or Betty Smith [author of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*]. They would probably be insulted if one suggested that the aesthetic gap, if any, between a good mystery and the best serious novel of the last ten years is hardly measurable on any scale that could measure the gap between the serious novel and any representative piece of Attic writing of the Fourth Century B.C., any ode of Pindar or Horace or Sappho, any Chorus of Sophocles, and so on.

Such protestations are not persuasive. The



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gap between popular and serious fiction is not as narrow as Chandler claims; and one cannot help thinking that Chandler knew this and was afraid of attempting to bridge that gap. As long as he confined himself to stylish detective fiction, as long as he was just a guy who "jacked up a few pulp novelettes into book form," he could be safe from critical scrutiny.

But the Library of America has ordained otherwise. If one is both serious about literature and a fan of Philip Marlowe, the question of the books' literary merit cannot be avoided. The easy answer is to qualify Auden's determination that Chandler's books "should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as works of art. We might say, that is, that *only* as escape literature do the novels work as art. What is the crime in thinking there is art to escape literature?—in which case, artificiality and frivolousness can be both tolerated and justified.

I prefer, however, a more elusive, less satisfying answer, one that accepts Chandler on his own terms as someone who took "a mediocre form and [made] something like literature out of it." Something like literature is to literature what Sinatra or the Beatles is to the classical repertoire, and yet one would be remiss to ignore them. There is a genius, after all, in good popular culture; surely some wacky minor demon smiled upon Irving Berlin, Fred Astaire, and Little Richard (a more senior demon clearly guided Buster Keaton), and if you can't spot the imp, then maybe you're too farsighted for your own good.

This is not exactly granting Chandler's work major status, and indeed no serious critic thus far has considered Chandler's recent canonization without putting invisible quotation marks around the word—an understandable qualification since the word is all but unnecessary when referring to writers who were canonical before the Library of America tagged them for membership. If forced, I suppose I, too, would have to concede that Chandler is best encountered before one has erected a critical citadel and when one is still young enough to believe in the possibility of a man like Marlowe.

But then I am not inclined to be impartial. The more I know of the man, the more I appreciate the artistry of the writer. Could Chandler have chosen a form of writing any more antithetical to his own temperament or sensibility? So Chandler becomes more interesting by virtue of having created Marlowe, and vice versa—a reciprocalness not pertinent to Poe and Dupin, Hammett and Spade, Rex Stout and Nero Wolfe, Dorothy Sayers and Lord Peter Wimsey, and even less so to Spillane and Mike Hammer.

T. J. Binyon, the Russian scholar and the *Times Literary Supplement*'s mystery maven, noted years ago that the second paragraph of *The Big Sleep* brings together Hammett and Fitzgerald. I think we can take this further. Just about all of Chandler's fiction is the fruit of this union. It may not have been deliberate, but now it seems entirely natural that an incurable romantic, who took his literary cue from the pulps, should express the cynicism and disillusionment of his age in a stylistically rich, comedic artifice, where language reigned supreme. "I live for syntax," Chandler said, and we should take him at his word. Not melancholy or alcoholism or numerous infirmities distracted him from the work. And it would be wrong of us to let this love for language and dedication to craft go unheralded.

## Soft-Hearted Hannah

HANNAH ARENDT/MARTIN HEIDEGGER. *By Elzbieta Ettinger. Yale University Press. $16.*

Reviewed by PAUL ROAZEN

This short book, which makes such a compelling narrative that it can be read through in an afternoon, has provoked wide publicity and intense controversy. It has been known since 1982 that as a young woman Hannah Arendt had an affair with her first philosophy mentor Martin Heidegger, who at the time was almost twice her age, married, and the father of two children; in 1924 he allegedly initiated the liaison, which was clandestine and lasted four years, and then he appears to have been responsible for breaking it off. Heidegger went on to become, for more than a decade, an enthusiastic member of the Nazi party, about which he remained afterwards unapologetic; he also is known as one of this

✪ PAUL ROAZEN's most recent book is *How Freud Worked: First-Hand Accounts of Patients.*



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century's most influential thinkers. Oddly enough, Arendt herself went on to write widely discussed books that often centered on the moral position of Jews, although she continued to treasure her bond with Heidegger.

The correspondence between Arendt and Heidegger, which started up again after World War II and lasted until their deaths (she died in 1975, he in 1976), had until now been embargoed, and Elzbieta Ettinger has scooped everyone in the field by her account of the letters they exchanged. The reader is bound to feel shortchanged by *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger*, since unlike the correspondence Arendt maintained with another of her philosophy teachers, Karl Jaspers, as well as that with her first literary executor, Mary McCarthy, we do not get here the texts of the letters themselves. Instead, what we find is but mainly Ettinger's engrossing gloss on the correspondence with some quotations from Arendt.

It sounds like Ettinger was strikingly lucky in getting to be able to read the Arendt-Heidegger letters. Heidegger's widow (a devout Nazi since the 1920s) lived on long after her husband, and for her sake the details of the affair were withheld. Then Ettinger, who successfully approached Arendt's current executor, was allowed to read copies of Arendt's letters as well as the Heidegger side, for the sake of a full-scale biography of Arendt. Ettinger decided, instead, just to concentrate on Arendt's relationship with Heidegger, to the shock of Arendt's executor, as well as the displeasure of one of Heidegger's sons, who had only given permission for his father's transcripts to be examined, not quoted. I am unclear whether it is the historical story of the relationship between Arendt and Heidegger that is so unsavory, the interpretation of it that Ettinger has provided, or a combination of the two; but both Arendt's executor and Heidegger's son are reported to have now decided to publish, in another couple of years, the complete letters themselves. It remains to be seen how much that documentation, which it would appear wiser for them to have allowed out initially, will change the terrible first impression that one takes away from Ettinger's *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger*.

Until now Arendt's reputation has been reaching critical heights that have gone largely uncontested. Although philosophers as distinguished as Stuart Hampshire and Isaiah Berlin have been spokesmen for those who object to the credulous popularity of Arendt's metaphysical windiness, that has not deterred aspiring academics from repeated efforts to explicate the complexities of Arendt's thinking. I can think of no recent political theorist who has attracted as much of a secondary literature, and this year alone there are said to be five international symposiums scheduled on Arendt's work.

Historians who have objected to Arendt's theses have been lumped together as biased, not because they are like legendary dry-as-dust British analytic philosophers, bound to be hostile to the scope of Continental theorists, but as representatives of the Jewish pro-Zionist intellectual establishment, permanently offended by Arendt's 1963 *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt's pride was to be a representative emissary of pre-Nazi German culture for the rest of the world, but it also led her, in her controversial Eichmann book, somehow to think she had written a neutral "report" on what she called "the banality of evil." Although she had consistently despised all forms of psychoanalytic thinking, and expressed her abhorrence even of introspection and romanticism, in her examination of Eichmann's trial she allowed herself to blame the victims of Nazism for their own self-destruction, and she also could not skip the tastelessness of dismissing Eichmann's prosecutor as a Galician Jew not up to the high standards of her own German background.

At the time Arendt first started publishing books in English—for example, with her 1951 *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—she was by no means out of step with the prevailing winds of dominant thought. "Totalitarianisim" as a concept is no longer in vogue, but at the time Arendt was writing, it was a modish way of describing both Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships, even if she was mainly concerned with the roots of the German regime. The Cold War was then at its height, and the belief was prevalent that so-called totalitarianism could only be toppled from the outside pressures of war. George F. Kennan, who now stands out as the one expert to predict prophetically that the Soviet system might collapse from internal pressures, then was stigmatized by his peers as a quasi-religious seer caught up in mysticism instead of hardheaded political realities.

Although Arendt began fashionably enough,



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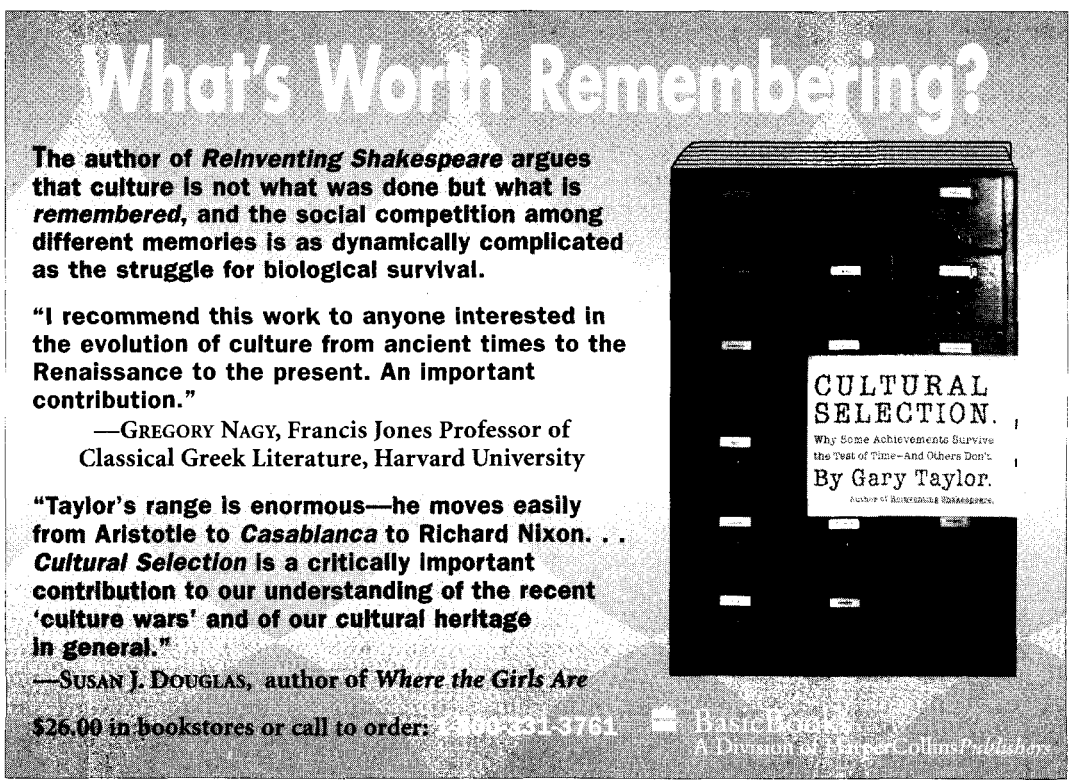
it was not long before all the idiosyncrasies of her thinking became known. As Ralph Ellison later observed, the brouhaha over her Eichmann book had been preceded by her perverse 1959 defense of the position of Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, who fought to preserve segregated schools until President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent troops to enforce desegregation in Little Rock. Arendt manipulated abstract concepts of "public," "private," and "social" in a breathtakingly high-handed manner. "Since the Supreme Court decision to enforce desegregation in public schools," she somehow claimed, "the general situation in the South has deteriorated." At the time it was hard to imagine where Arendt, who had been in the States since 1941, had been spiritually living, or what her true values were.

Now Hannah Arendt's involvement with Heidegger, as best we can understand it thanks to Ettinger's excellent book, casts a further shadow over her current standing. It has to be striking that Arendt, so free in expressing ethical judgments about the actions of others, could have remained so enmeshed with Heidegger. How much of the tie can be attributed to romance, as opposed to opportunism, may inevitably be impossible to reconstruct. We do know that once Arendt got back in touch with Heidegger after World War II, she reversed some of her earlier criticisms of him as she helped rehabilitate Heidegger's politics (Ettinger considers it whitewashing) in the post-Nazi period. She disguised from Jaspers, her other teacher, some of her meetings with Heidegger, perhaps, according to Ettinger, out of protectiveness as she sought not to hurt Jaspers. In notes to herself, as well as in communications with Jaspers, she was open about Heidegger's capacity for mendacity, yet she herself continued to visit him as often as he would permit. The kindest approach, which Ettinger adopts, would be to interpret Arendt's behavior as part of the irrationality of love, the way passion could take control of her.

As she did with Jaspers, Arendt gave Heidegger publishing advice and worked on behalf of his translations. She was tempted to dedicate the German edition of her book *The Human Condition* (1958) to Heidegger, but held back. Her letters to him sound profuse, although in writing to Jaspers she could be savage about Heidegger. It is true that the full





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details of Heidegger's activities as a Nazi have grown substantially worse with close historical inspection, but one suspects that Arendt must have known how bad the real story was; Jaspers, for example, remained adamant about not recommending that Heidegger be allowed to teach in Germany right after the end of World War II. Heidegger's address in 1933, on becoming rector at Freiburg University, was notorious, and she, in writing to Jaspers, was unremitting about Heidegger's misbehavior toward his former teacher Edmund Husserl. Ettinger provides disquieting particulars to Arendt's twists and turns connected with Heidegger, even if she does not seem to want to acknowledge the extent to which Arendt and Heidegger might have been mutually exploitive of each other.

Other of Heidegger's students—Herbert Marcuse, for example—were less forgiving of his Nazi activities. It is striking how Arendt, so unsympathetic to the Jewish plight in Central Europe under the Nazis, found ways to rationalize Heidegger's beliefs and misconduct. One tack was for her to put the weight of the responsibility on Heidegger's wife, although Heidegger himself late in life insisted that the three of them be on the footing of intimate friendship. (Ettinger, perhaps justifiably, does not explore the rumor that Arendt and Heidegger, however briefly, renewed their physical liaison after the Second World War. She does tell us that in the same period Arendt's second husband "erroneously considered her affair with Heidegger as ended.") According to Arendt, Heidegger was like Plato in turning to a tyrant in practical affairs. Somehow she convinced herself that Heidegger had never read *Mein Kampf*, as if that would have been somehow to his credit. One has to question the alleged wonders of old German cultural life if the failure to read such a book should have somehow counted in Heidegger's favor. (In reality, he had read *Mein Kampf* as early as 1931.)

Partisans of Arendt, and Heidegger too, are apt to want to dissociate philosophy from practical politics. Arendt's first biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, who was not given access to the Arendt-Heidegger correspondence, has been quoted recently maintaining that even now the affair between them cannot be shown to have had a strong influence on her thought. One has to wonder how distant from human experience it is possible for intellectual historians to become. The initial news of the involvement between Arendt and Heidegger came as traumatic to some of Arendt's most morally sensitive students. The rise to power of the Nazis remains, I think, the single most significant political event in twentieth-century history; the most highly educated country in Central Europe willingly chose to vote into office a monster of well-publicized views. Academic philosophers may continue to be inclined to minimize the significance of Heidegger's politics; other German intellectuals did collaborate with the Nazis, too. About Arendt, however, no one can lay claim to her equaling Heidegger's technical philosophic originality; and in the light of her Eichmann thesis, it may be hard not to wonder if she was not engaging there in a subtle if unconscious form of self-criticism. If Eichmann was simply following orders, and his conduct certifiably normal within the context of Nazi Germany, her own defense of Heidegger can reflect the way a social thinker such as herself might be conditioned by circumstances and advantage to curry favor in the midst of the most vile forms of evil. Having as a Jew escaped from Germany in 1933, Arendt remained for the rest of her life loyal to the whole philosophic tradition that had helped lead to Hitlerism, and the tale of how she continued to dance around Heidegger's reputation may have permanently damaged her ethical standing.

It is not clear to me that Ettinger is fully conscious of the blow she has administered to Arendt. Ettinger is surely aware of how much she detests Heidegger. Yet when we are told that Heidegger's zealously pro-Nazi spouse was "perhaps an ideal wife for Heidegger," Ettinger has undercut Heidegger in a special way. While Ettinger tells us that "Heidegger's apologists (including Hannah Arendt) endeavored to portray him as a helpless victim of her [his wife's] sinister obsession," Ettinger herself believes that Heidegger was "never a tool in the hands of his wife or anyone else."

Ettinger may be correct that Arendt "exculpated" Heidegger "not as much out of loyalty, compassion, or a sense of justice as out of her own need to save her pride and dignity." Yet I suspect that Arendt would be shocked to see herself as such a stereotypical love-stricken creature, a silly goose even in her old age. Somehow Arendt was taken aback by Hei-



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degger's wife's jealousy of her. Even if Arendt seems not to have been the only instance of Heidegger's adultery, it is hard to believe that she can have expected anything other than jealousy on Elfride Heidegger's part. Yet the Nazi ideology that the couple shared brought them closer together. It should come as no great surprise that Arendt could disguise from her own second husband, as she did from Karl Jaspers, exactly what was going on between her and Heidegger after World War II.

The complexities of Central European manners are bound, from the point of view of straight-shooting Americans, to sound like whirlpools of treacherous friendships. To take just one example, when Arendt was in 1961 reading the galleys of Heidegger's Nietzsche treatise for her friend Kurt Woolf, who was not by chance Heidegger's own American publisher, "she did not mention it to Jaspers," lest she upset her ailing elderly teacher. In 1969, when the Heideggers needed money, they turned to Arendt for advice about how best to go about selling the manuscript of *Being and Time*. As Ettinger points out, where money was involved they turned to a Jew for help. And Arendt was fully obliging and cooperative.

Intellectuals make at least as many political, moral, and personal mistakes as anybody else. Ordinary folk, however, may not have the same capacity for self-deception as more high-powered minds. For the sake of Arendt's reputation—and it is the quotations from her letters to Heidegger that do so much damage—one wonders if she would not have been shrewder to have destroyed this whole correspondence. For a politically savvy woman, who wrote repeatedly about authenticity and lying, it may have been humanly impossible for her to destroy a past she did not see as damaging. Heidegger, too, had his own ways of self-deception, although the final verdict surely must await the publication of the full text of these letters. There has been a longstanding Heidegger controversy, and now Arendt is a secure part of it. One only hopes that in time professional philosophy will attain the ideal of impartiality, so that the story of Arendt and Heidegger will get put in proper perspective without either apologetics or undue moralizing. Although Arendt would not have liked the help that Freud's writings could offer, in a warning to one of his own loyal potential biographers, Freud reminded us how Hamlet might have been right when he wondered who would escape whipping were he used after his desert.

## Pop Goes the Critic

CULTURAL STUDIES AND CULTURAL VALUE. *By John Frow. Oxford University Press. $17.95.*

Reviewed by PETER SCHWENDENER

John Frow's new book is a critique of the burgeoning discipline (or anti-discipline, as it calls itself) of "cultural studies." What is cultural studies? To Frow, it is a form of intellectual inquiry that derives its meaning from the opposition of "high" to "low" culture. The central contention of his book is that this opposition, as it appears in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Umberto Eco, Andrew Ross, and other theorists, is rather shaky, and is in fact obstructing a true approach to the vexing question of what "culture" means. Those who expect this book to lash out at leftist academics who place the works of John Lennon on a par with those of Shakespeare will be disappointed, because Frow is primarily interested in the theory rather than the practice of cultural studies. At times, however, a mood of jollity kicks in, as when he considers the views of John Fiske, a scholar of popular culture who believes that "the wearing of torn jeans, or listening to rock music, or going shopping all work as models of political resistance and opposition to 'the power bloc.'"

The book is divided into four closely argued chapters. In the first, "The Social Organization of Culture," Frow assails the crudity of the high culture/low culture distinction as it appears in the works of two French sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau. Bourdieu has argued that all cultural activities, such as attending concerts, taking photographs, or going to museums, are direct expressions of one's economic class, which is either upper or lower. If you are of the

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former, you will be irresistibly drawn to the works of Bach; otherwise you will delight in Petula Clark and "The Blue Danube." There is some manifest silliness in Bourdieu's approach to cultural differences, but there is also seriousness and considerable subtlety (in choosing to concentrate his critique on Bourdieu, Frow has not chosen an easy target). In Bourdieu's theory, "the aesthetic disposition," meaning the tendency to hold works of art aloof from all practical considerations, characterizes "the ruling class alone." The "popular aesthetic," by contrast, thinks of art solely in terms of the real world: in the realm of the popular aesthetic, for example, photography is used to commemorate weddings and other family gatherings; once people begin photographing rocky coasts or sunsets, they are moving toward "high" culture.

Bourdieu maintains that what we commonly think of as high culture is an ability to distance ourselves from the "content" of works of art, or to limit our attention to a work's purely formal properties. It is at this point that Frow decides to pick a fight with him. Bourdieu, Frow argues, has fabricated a monolithic entity known as "the people" and opposed it to an equally undifferentiated lump known as "the ruling class." The value of many of Bourdieu's observations is undercut by a crude tendency to deify the working class. Despite his pretenses to "a rigorously scientific relativism," Bourdieu is "not interested in giving a detached 'account' of aesthetic codes." His analysis is, rather, "almost explicitly interventionist, working to discount 'aesthetic' experience (understood as primarily an experience of form) and to valorize the directness of the working-class relation to the world." The problem is not merely that this patronizes the working class, denying to its members any interest in artistic form, but that it rests on a crude severance of "form" from "content" that Bourdieu himself rejects in his book *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Frow mainly concerns himself with Bourdieu's major work, *Distinction*).

Frow's criticism of Bourdieu carries over into a discussion of "The Concept of the Popular." Here the unfortunate John Fiske, author of *Understanding Popular Culture*, comes in for a drubbing. Fiske holds the doubtful view that once a commodity, such as a pair of blue jeans, passes "the point of sale," it is magically released from its commercial origin. It then becomes "a resource for the culture of everyday life." Like Bourdieu, though on a somewhat lower conceptual level, Fiske operates under an unexamined compulsion to purify and simplify the domain of "the popular." This is, in fact, an inveterate tendency of all intellectuals who feel drawn to the topic. Thus Iain Chambers, author of *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*, writes:

> Official culture, preserved in art galleries, museums, and university courses, demands cultivated tastes and a formally imparted knowledge. It demands moments of attention that are separated from the run of daily life. Popular culture, meanwhile, mobilizes the tactile, the incidental, the transitory, the expendable; the visceral. It does not involve an abstract aesthetic research amongst privileged objects of attention, but invokes mobile orders of sense, taste and desire.

This is wrong: much popular culture evinces a high degree of intellectualism, even scholasticism. "Think, for example," Frow writes, "of the effort that teenagers put into constructing a learned canon of recorded music, and of the whole pop-scholarly apparatus that goes into that construction."

Frow, who is a Professor of English at the University of Queensland, Australia, believes in cultural studies and is concerned not to discredit it but to purge it of certain methodological flaws. In the latter half of the book, he considers the problem of "cultural value." Cultural value is the impulse that underlies the preference for one cultural good over another: a novel by Theodore Dreiser over one by Stephen Crane, or, if one is intent on subversion, a novel by William S. Burroughs over both. He argues, convincingly, that mere class affiliation provides no insight into this impulse, which is elusive, if not—to use a dirty word—ultimately personal. It is true that personal taste is a factor that cannot be wholly destroyed by cultural brainwashing, but Frow perhaps underestimates the extent to which culture today has become a rigged game. As the literary critic Graham Hough once put it, "If enough Fulbright professors go around the world saying that Hawthorne is as good as Dostoevsky, if you pay enough copywriters to say that Saul Bellow is a great novelist, many people will come to believe it." One doesn't have to share Hough's estimates of Bellow or Hawthorne to see that he has a point.



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Cultural studies tends to construct models of "the people" or "the popular" that do not fit the facts: in his book *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, Andrew Ross constructs a politically conscious popular culture that has no earthly counterpart, and in a study of the James Bond novels (a project that, like much cultural studies work, does not seem inherently absurd), Umberto Eco fabricates an "average reader" of the Bond novels by "ignoring," as Frow puts it, "the systems of cultural reference that structure popular readings." The impulse to ignore the real character of popular culture (including its own special kinds of complexity and allusiveness) suggests an elitist strain in the cultural studies movement. If cultural studies is in fact unworkable as a discipline—a possibility Frow does not concede—it may be because it is forced to impose a "high" value on everything it touches: it cannot let popular culture be simply popular but is forced by its own methodology to place a shampoo commercial on a par with Hegel.

The most challenging part of Frow's argument concerns the old, and to many people unrewarding, question of the social status of "intellectuals." As he points out, the classic attempt to determine who, exactly, "intellectuals" are and what they are supposed to be doing occurs in Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), where intellectuals are delicately defined as a group of "relatively classless" or "unanchored" individuals. He arrives at his own vision of intellectuals by revising a concept of Bourdieu's—namely that of "cultural capital." In Bourdieu's sociology, cultural capital is simply another name for "the aesthetic disposition," the rather languorous ability to confine one's interest to the "formal" properties of things. To Frow, the intellectual class is not distinguished by exquisite sensibilities or connoisseurship in the arts but by uneasy awareness of multiple cultural "codes." Its social function is not that of defending the interests of any economically defined class but of dangerously perceiving that all class interests, its own included, are vulnerable to criticism. Cultural capital, in other words, gives intellectuals a certain measure of control over questions of cultural value but debars them from speaking in any simple way for "the people," not to mention for "the ruling class."

Frow's argument, though conducted in rather forbidding prose, is frequently brilliant,


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especially when dissolving attempts, such as Bourdieu's, to reduce aesthetics to a series of economic diagrams. More excitingly, the argument threatens at times to break away from the drab and stifling topic of "cultural studies" into areas of broader social concern. Ultimately, however, it remains a critique of the methods of cultural studies, and it is hard to agree with its conclusion that a simple junking of crude economics as a basis for understanding culture will bring maturity and cogency to the field. There are, it seems, two reasons, neither of them economic, for casting doubt on the validity of cultural studies. The first is that there is a fundamental antagonism between "study," which denotes concentration, and "popular culture," which denotes something like the opposite of concentration. The other, more interesting reason is that historically this has not always been the case. Popular culture, as vast tracts of English literature (not just novels) show, has often been on speaking terms with high culture in all senses—moral, formal, even religious—of the word high. An example is Eliot's use of vulgar idioms and music-hall themes, not in raw juxtaposition with references to Shakespeare and Greek tragedy, but as part of the substance of his poetry. If popular culture still merged easily and naturally with ambitious designs in literature and the other arts, the idea of studying it would need no defense.

## Thrilling Days of Yesteryear

THE LOST CITY. *By Alan Ehrenhalt. Basic Books. $24.*

Reviewed by STEPHEN MILLER

In recent years, according to many opinion polls, many Americans have begun to sing the blues about the United States. Far from seeing the collapse of Soviet communism as a sign of the resilience of market-based democracy, they think that America is in a state of permanent decline—its politicians catering to special interests, its corporations exporting jobs to the Third World, its citizens increasingly untrustworthy. A consequence of this national funk is a growing interest in the 1950s, a decade that is now being touted by some writers as the last time the United States worked, though for years the 1950s were reviled by many writers as conformist, complacent, and rabidly anti-communist.

In *The Lost City,* Alan Ehrenhalt, a former journalist who is the executive editor of *Governing* magazine, journeys back to the Chicago of the 1950s, which was known at the time as "the city that works." Painting portraits of three different neighborhoods in the greater Chicago area—a working-class Irish community, a black ghetto in what we would now call the inner city, and a new close-in suburb with no distinctive ethnic flavor—Ehrenhalt argues that Chicago worked in the 1950s because most Chicagoans had a strong sense of community and a decent respect for authority.

Books that praise the good old days should be regarded with a certain skepticism. Samuel Johnson once said that as we grow older we tend to complain about "the growing depravity of the world" and speak of the "happy age" of our youth, "which is now no more to be expected, since confusion has broken in upon the world, and thrown down all the boundaries of civility and reverence." Ehrenhalt's journey to the lost city, however, is not an exercise in nostalgia, which Robert Nisbet once called "the rust of memory." He does not ignore Chicago's dark side: rampant corruption, organized crime, and the second-class citizenship of blacks, who often were harassed by the police and always were denied entrance to all but six of the seventy-seven hospitals in the Chicago metropolitan area. The good old days were not good for everyone, but even Chicago's blacks were relatively satisfied with their lives and moderately upbeat about the future. The contentment of Chicagoans in the 1950s, Ehrenhalt insists, "was real—and widespread."

In some respects, it is easy to understand why so many Chicagoans were content with their lives in the 1950s. Many had grown up in the Depression, yet now they were making good money working at factories that were booming, owing to the surge in consumer demand after the end of World War II. The war itself, which virtually all Americans supported,

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was a "confidence builder" that created a bond among the millions of Americans who were veterans. "You didn't do a lot of talking about it, but if a guy was a veteran, you knew he was a pretty good guy," one veteran told Ehrenhalt. "People were glad to be back and they felt any challenge could be overcome if they put their minds to it."

Their contentment also came from being part of a community. Most Chicagoans lived in neighborhoods where they knew almost everyone, including the local shopkeepers. They kept busy after work by participating in many activities that usually were sponsored by their church. Their children spent a lot of time playing on the street (or in the alleys behind the houses), even at night because the crime rate was low. Since most houses were not air-conditioned, on hot summer evenings people sat on stoops and chatted until late in the evening. There was little solitude, which—as writers from Aristotle to Samuel Johnson have said—stirs up gloomy thoughts.

Chicagoans were also content because they didn't seem to worry about what they might be missing in life. They were grateful for what they had; they had a sense of limits. They also did not agonize over moral and social questions. "In Chicago in the 1950s, there were no complex societal explanations of bad behavior, no histories of child abuse or substance abuse or low self-esteem, no failure on the part of insensitive parents or authorities. The explanation was that there were bad people—sinners. If you were smart, you kept your distance."

Ehrenhalt's well-written book is refreshing because he does not belittle the narrow horizons and anti-intellectual outlook of working-class and lower-middle-class Chicagoans. He likes them, even admires them, but he doesn't romanticize them. He wants to know what made them tick. And, more important, he wants to know why such optimistic, community-minded citizens disappeared. Why did their children become "hyper-individualists" who, according to Ehrenhalt, are preoccupied with privacy, fearful of authority, and obsessed with choice?

Ehrenhalt raises the right questions, yet his treatment of choice is not completely satisfactory. He argues that "many things may be said for and against the concept of school choice, but one point is clear enough—in education. . . individual choice is the antithesis of author-

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ity." Not so. Many parents who push for school choice often want to send their children to schools that promote traditional authority. School choice doesn't necessarily undermine authority; it erodes the quasi monopoly of the public school bureaucracy.

Although Ehrenhalt is on target when he refers to the preoccupation with personal choice that is a main characteristic of hyper-individualism, the reasons he gives for the rise of hyper-individualism are not persuasive. First, he suggests that the children of the 1950s rebelled against their strict and socially demanding childhood. Ehrenhalt lumps all baby boomers together under the editorial "we"—saying that "we of the baby-boom generation" worship choice. Who is this "we"? Not all baby boomers think alike; not all became hyper-individualists. There has been a good deal more continuity in American life than Ehrenhalt allows for, which explains why in the last two decades there has been a continuing debate about how to view the 1950s.

Secondly, Ehrenhalt says that hyper-individualism was largely the result of the growing influence of market forces. As he puts it: "In the 1950s . . . a whole array of social institutions still stood outside the grip of the market and provided ordinary people with a cushion against it. . . . The difference between the 1950s and the 1990s is to a large extent the difference between a society in which market forces challenged traditional values and a society in which they have triumphed over them."

This explanation is weak, since it is not clear how social institutions that lie outside the grip of the market can be destroyed by the market. If people don't go to church, don't join civic associations, don't even chat with their neighbors, it is not because of market forces. Market forces account for the loss of many neighborhood stores (though such stores still exist in major cities), and market forces have made life more difficult for many working-class Americans, but market forces did not turn people into hyper-individualists since market forces are a constant.

Traditional values, I would argue, were undermined by values—or, rather, ideas—that challenged them, a point that Ehrenhalt hints at but never fully develops. He alludes to the influence of Benjamin Spock, who in *Baby and Child Care* said that he wanted to end "the long repressive reach of tradition." Spock's phrase speaks volumes. In the 1950s, tradition was put on the couch by psychologists, who pronounced it to be a force that promoted repression and neurosis.

The growing influence of psychology in the 1950s—what Philip Rieff called "the triumph of the therapeutic"—played a major role in undermining authority. A number of influential books, including Theodor W. Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* and Eric Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, argued that authority was a repressive force that created neurotic individuals who were bad parents and bad citizens. Hadn't the United States, it was said, won a war against a society in which people worshiped authority? Ehrenhalt, however, blames the erosion of authority on autocrats who abused their positions of authority. Describing the conduct of Father Lynch, an autocratic priest, he says that "the Father Lynches of the world gave authority a reputation it has yet to lose—and may not lose until all the postwar children who endured them begin to pass from the scene. The consequence is that an entire generation of Americans has found it difficult to think sensibly about the legitimate role that authority must play in any decent and civil society." It's hard to see how the Father Lynches of the world would have had such an influence if popular psychologists hadn't drummed into baby boomers that all such figures of authority were making them neurotic.

The influence of popular psychology crossed the generation gap; many people—not only baby boomers—became preoccupied with self-fulfillment. To be sure, many still paid homage to traditional values, going to church and listening to traditional sermons, but when they came home they read popular psychologists who were syndicated columnists. The influence of popular psychology also affected child rearing. Parents began to worry that they might crush their children's self-esteem if they exercised any authority. Instead of being parents, they were now learning about "parenting." Finally, the influence of popular psychology turned some of the confident parents of the 1950s into querulous Archie Bunkers who could only sputter and sneer when their enlightened children told them how backward and authoritarian they were.

Although Ehrenhalt doesn't pay enough attention to the role that popular psychology



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played in promoting hyper-individualism and eroding authority, he does implicitly recognize that it is simplistic to blame America's civic discontents mainly on market forces, for he says that "what really matters is what the next generation grows up believing. . . . What will they think about community and authority, habit and choice, sin and virtue?" Ideas matter. And there are a number of signs that Americans are becoming disenchanted with the ideas promoted by popular psychologists, perhaps because the gospel of self-fulfillment often leads to loneliness—the aging hyper-individualist exercising his personal choice by spending hours using a remote-control device to channel surf. "Too many things we do in our lives," Ehrenhalt says, ". . . have come to resemble channel surfing."

Ehrenhalt knows that we cannot return to the lost city of the 1950s, but he is cautiously optimistic that a new generation of Americans will "swing back to older values." Whether his cautious optimism is warranted remains to be seen, but his book is a good sign of the times because it raises the questions we need to think about as we negotiate the American future.

## Necessity and Nobility

THE HUMANITY OF THUCYDIDES. *By Clifford Orwin. Princeton Unviersity Press. $35.*

Reviewed by WILSON CAREY MCWILLIAMS

Thucydides introduced *The Peloponnesian War* by locating himself in space and time as an Athenian who began his history at the outset of the conflict. Yet his writing suggests a more distant perspective. Dionysius of Halicarnassus noticed that Thucydides had a fondness for words that were ancient or foreign; he also questioned Thucydides' taste in holding his own city responsible for the war. Thucydides strained against the temporalities, believing, Clifford Orwin argues, that the important political things, like human nature, are universal and enduring. So they are, and Orwin's art as a political philosopher helps us hear Thucydides across the millennia and against the fashions of our noisy agora.

Orwin is a teacher of high quality, and his readers will find his erudition a grace rather than an obstacle. Broadly, he follows Leo Strauss (as well as such classicists as W. R. Connor and Lowell Edmunds) in regarding *The Peloponnesian War* as unified by a coherent teaching, a view that has largely displaced the effort to explain Thucydides' apparent inconsistencies by referring to different "stages" of his writing of his history.

But understanding Thucydides' teaching isn't easy. Some extraordinary readers got it wrong. Rousseau praised Thucydides as the "model of historians" for presenting "facts" without "putting himself between the events and his readers," going on to fault Thucydides for writing about war and battles, the "least instructive" part of human experience. Rousseau's Thucydides is a good historian, but a bad teacher. Orwin has more in common with Hobbes, who called Thucydides "politic" for hiding himself in his narration in order to teach more effectively. As a historian, Thucydides is suspect: other problems aside, some of his characters—including Diodotus, who gives what Orwin regards as the wisest speech in Thucydides' book—are unknown outside Thucydides' work and may be his inventions. Such artfulness, however, only emphasizes Thucydides' skill as a teacher of politics, one who excels in reconstructing subtle or ambiguous speeches that invite a comparison between what was said and what was done. Still, although Thucydides' writing, like Plato's, combines speeches and narrative, narration bulks larger. Thucydides' teaching is more constrained by events and shadowed by necessity.

Seeing that side of Thucydides, political scientists often treat him as a "realist" who described a politics of power. In part, that was Hobbes's reading. But, as Orwin comments, unlike Thucydides, Hobbes is impish and debunking, convinced that political science can lay out a plan for politics. Thucydides lacked that faith because his humanity is more multidimensional: his politics includes both necessity and the longing to be free, the desire to be safe, but also the demand for justice and the quest for the noble. That panoply of hu-

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man motives, immanent in politics, makes a hash of the rationalist's hope that politics can be reduced to a science.

Necessity is primordial, and the first human societies, Thucydides tells us, were despotisms founded on the rule of the strong. By contrast, political society rests on rule by roughly equal citizens, guided by standards of justice and the common good, as defined by custom, speech, and law—foundations that are contingent, conventional, and domestic. International politics, and especially war, pulls politics back toward its pre-political origins in the rule of force. The great contest between Athens and Sparta was bound to erode the ideal of "Greekness" and, eventually, the moral order within cities. War is the enemy of political excellence, and foreign policy constrains autonomy; a good regime will strive to give priority to domestic life.

Relatively indifferent to empire, Sparta was content to live within its conventions and forms, proclaiming its devotion to justice and piety. As Orwin shows, however, Sparta was ultimately moved by fear. Strained to maintain its hegemony over the helots and its allies, Sparta could not match, and knew itself to be threatened by, Athenian expansion. Sparta's moral pretensions were mummeries, but its very hypocrisies defended Spartan moral community, and for Thucydides these were marks of Sparta's relative political health.

For the most part, Spartans were brave but otherwise commonplace; Athens won virtually all the prizes for human excellence. Yet Athens was preeminently a city "in motion," caught up in change and inclined to downgrade tradition, family, and piety. Pericles praised Athens for its freedom; its citizens competed for rank and glory, convinced that the most shameful thing is to be ruled, while their itch for dominion was soothed by love for the city and for its power. Hence what Orwin calls "the Athenian thesis": that the strong will rule whenever it is in their interest. At the same time, Athenian spokesmen claimed that Athens acted nobly, gently where possible, but always clear-sightedly, combining daring with calculation in understanding and following natural necessity.

Evidently, Athenian confidence led to a tendency to overreach that, to the pious, amounted to hubris. Outraged by Mytilene's rebellion, the Athenians voted to kill all the men in that city and to enslave the women and children. The next day, however, they had doubts about the propriety of punishing the whole city rather than the authors of the trouble only, and Diodotus persuaded them to change their decree. Orwin's analysis of this debate is shrewd. Although the debate turns on a question of justice, the argument is cast in pragmatic terms. As Diodotus remarks, Athenian speech has become so corrupted by factional politics that one must deceive the city in order to lead it back to a sense of the political good.

Diodotus's argument from expediency depends on the moral proposition that the desire for self-government is so naturally human that Mytilene, however foolish, did not act wickedly. It also rests on the teaching that all human beings are prone to exaggerate their ability to escape necessity. The stronger the regime, the greater the lure of freedom and glory, and the less reliable the moderating restraint of fear.

Hobbes read that lesson and, as Orwin indicates, set out to reduce political society to individuals more vulnerable and more safely rational. A strategy of fragmentation followed by, among others, the authors of *The Federalist.* On that view of things, the distrust of politics is a democratic virtue, working against both tyranny, and political excess.

But the politics of individualism has its own shortcomings. As Orwin indicates, the Syracusan expedition was well within Athens's power. Defeat resulted from Athens's internal divisions. In great crises, a political society needs the capacity to sacrifice for the common good and the kind of leaders who can evoke its nobler impulses. A good city—and a good democracy more than most—cannot do without trust and piety and justice; "in motion" in so many things, in wide areas of life it needs to be "at rest."

Thucydides praised the Council of 5,000 as Athens's "best regime," a moderating blend of the few and the many, a rare instance of decency wedded to dash. Yet the Council held a teetering balance, bound to tip with the first political wind. The best politics depends on luck and on statecraft, and even when those elements are present, it is likely to be short-lived.

Thucydides deflates the highest claims and



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hopes of politics, endorsing both the Athenian perception that justice is fragile and the Spartan acknowledgment of the limits of reason. Yet, as Clifford Orwin demonstrates, Thucydides also saw the inadequacy of any politics that does not recognize the perennial longing for what is great, true, and only very imperfectly reflected in practice. In the end, Thucydides' wisdom points toward Plato and the effort to frame a politics in speech capable of both judging and appreciating the limited excellences of action.

## Impossible Reason

THE MYSTERY TO A SOLUTION: POE, BORGES, AND THE ANALYTIC DETECTIVE STORY. *By John Irwin. Johns Hopkins University Press. $36.95.*

Reviewed by EDGARDO KREBS

The paradox caused by a simultaneous belief in reason and in the impossibility of understanding through reason is the driving tension of Borges's writing. It orders all his labyrinths and directs all his mirrors; from it derive most of his obsessions and deliberate literary architectures. Acknowledging this from the onset, two solid virtues make of John Irwin's book the most useful written on Borges to date: it matches the intellectual rigor of the stories and poems it seeks to interpret, and it patiently reveals the complex ties of scholarly allusions and concerns that turn Borges's fictions into radical meditations on language, symbols, and meaning.

The genre of analytic detective fiction, as practiced by its founder, Edgar Allan Poe, in the Dupin stories, is elegantly suited for playing out that tension. As John Irwin explains, Poe's detective stories are circular and endless because they are devised less to solve a mystery than to prompt "analyzing the act of analysis," an operation through which "self-conscious thought turns back upon itself to find out it cannot absolutely coincide with itself."

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EDGARDO KREBS received an M.Phil in Social Anthropology at Oxford, where he is currently working on a thesis about the Argentine frontier in the nineteenth century.

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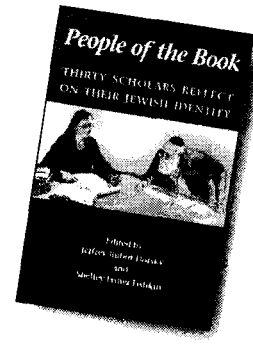


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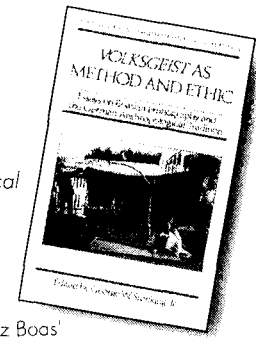


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In a section on Lacan, Irwin also credits Borges with initiating this particular reading of Poe—namely, in three short stories of his own, published symmetrically one hundred years after the Dupin trilogy. To "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" Borges paired "The Garden of Forking Paths"; to "The Mystery of Marie Roget," "Death and the Compass"; and to "The Purloined Letter," "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth." As Irwin convincingly demonstrates, Borges's stories are not only an interpretation, but a reversal of those by Poe. While the outcome of Poe's analytical fictions is the victory of mind, "in Borges's detective stories . . . mastery shifts to the sinister side." At the center of all of Borges's labyrinths it is the beast, not the hero, who triumphs.

This reversal is not, as another reviewer assumed, inconsequential, "Borges at play, asserting the formal independence of fiction." For one thing, the elaborate oppositions between mind and body, reason and instinct, right and left, north and south, male and female, master/God and slave/human, and so forth, that unfold in both Poe's and Borges's fictions are all deliberate and encoded with meaning. Irwin's study makes this clear beyond doubt. Given to choose in a deadly serious game between one side that is brooding and another that is casting a spell, Borges—unlike Poe—decides for the second. They both share a recognition that the hunter and the hunted are the same man, specular images inextricably bound, giving meaning to each other. But in the final vertigo, Poe concedes the upper hand to the mind, and Borges concludes that the best that can happen to intelligence is for it to cease. "Useless to reply that reality, too, is ordered," he states in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "maybe it is, but in accordance to divine laws—I translate: inhuman laws—which we will never completely perceive. Tlön may be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth plotted by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men." Getting to the center is finally to recognize this frailty; being overcome by something other, the reward.

Borges saw himself as a man of letters constantly spinning a web of thought, longing for a heroic, military fate—a fate like that of his paternal grandfather, Colonel Francisco Borges, who died on horseback leading his men into battle. Borges dedicated a poem to him that ends with the lines: "High I leave him in his epic universe/hardly touched by my verse." Epic figures in Borges's writing have no words. They take the contrary form of the barbarian, the anti-intellectual: the Indian who raided the white settlements of nineteenth-century Argentina, the knife-wielding toughs of the suburbs of Buenos Aires, or, most prominently, of the Gaucho, that lean and bearded man on horseback, the creation of a wide frontier and an uncivil colony, whom tradition depicted as roaming the unfenced plains freely and history represents as fighting against the Spanish in the wars for independence. These men were intimate with the land in a way far superior to—as Borges puts it in the transparent story "The South"—"my nostalgic and literary knowledge." These are the men who lie at the center of Borges's labyrinths, casting a spell, following his every thought, outwitting him in the end.

In Borges it is the beast that knows better. What is monstrous is to have knowledge that does not reflect upon itself, knowledge that cannot be explained without falsification. This is a point that Borges makes quite clear in his story "The Ethnographer," where the knowledge that the protagonist brings back from his fieldwork does not transfer into words and an ethnography, but into retirement and silence. In a blind search for that undivided knowledge, Borges has the main character (and self-image) in this story board a train in cosmopolitan Buenos Aires and travel deep into the plains, toward the perfect fate of finding death in the knife of a barbarian.

In a conveniently paradoxical way, Irwin's study, which does not attempt to place Borges in his Argentine context, makes that context, like the purloined letter on the table in Poe's famous story, obvious. After Irwin's book there can be no further excuses for assuming that Borges was something other than a very Argentine writer. This fact can now remain invisible only to those who project on him a very simple ethnocentric expectation of what his literature should be—ethnocentric in the sense of being construed at a distance by a European or North American imagination; or in the sense of what Borges himself saw as folkloric, picturesque, "Latin American."

Beyond the merit of providing a meticulous and elegantly tight argument on an intricate subject matter, John Irwin's book indeed sug-



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gests a number of new avenues for research and for reading Borges that should prove of rich and lasting value.

The topic of Poe's influence on Borges, for instance, points to the complexity of a much wider dialogue that Borges himself and other Latin American writers had with their North American counterparts. Especially in the nineteenth century that dialogue had the urgent purpose of establishing a national literature and of finding a personal voice within it. Another Argentine writer, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento—at one time also president of the country—was the first to draw attention to American fiction. He admired Fenimore Cooper, met with Emerson during one of his two visits to the United States, and stated in his very influential book *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants* (1845) that if a national literature was to emerge in "the new American societies" it would be through describing nature and the contest between European civilization and local barbarism.

Sarmiento was for Borges the decisive Argentine writer. "Sarmiento dreamt us all," he acknowledged in a poem. He was decisive because he initiated the engagement with American fiction and because he created the first of those symbolic folds separating opposing halves, folds that serve so well for hiding ambivalent feelings and putting into motion a maze-like game of codes. Borges took this double tradition inaugurated by Sarmiento to very sophisticated extremes. Beyond Poe, he carefully read and rewrote the authors of the so-called American Renaissance and was eclectically mindful of Faulkner and others, and, as his rare *Introduction to American Literature* (1971) shows, of Native American oral poetry. All this needs to be better studied.

Further study is also warranted for Borges's closest, most intimate intellectual biography: on Macedonio Fernandez, a man Borges admired for his intelligence and unexpected lines of inquiry; on fellow author Ricardo Güiraldes, who might have fostered or initiated Borges's curiosity for the Orient and for Jewish mysticism; and for Xul Solar, a painter of abstract watercolors who was also eccentrically committed to inventing a new universal language made of monosyllables. These friendships, which evolved in bars and during endless walks crisscrossing Buenos Aires, are as significant for understanding Borges as his often-quoted partiality toward Swedenborg, Kafka, Chesterton, or Poe.

Borges's last book returns to Poe and to the world of chess moves, labyrinths, and mirrors that Irwin has tread so carefully. In *Los Conjurados* (The Plotters) published in 1985, the title poem places Borges in Geneva, amid men "professing different religions, speaking different languages," men who have coincided in the "strange resolution of being thoughtful" and are building in the heart of Europe "a tower of reason and of firm faith." As with the idealists in Tlön, Borges hopes that these men will one day be the whole world.

Borges certainly chose to die in "one of my countries," Geneva, where he is also buried, a gesture to his accepted profession as an intellectual. The other country, we know, is Argentina, waiting at the center of the labyrinth. He left that fateful game open—the difference between the two Borgeses high strung for others to ponder.

# Against Misinterpretation

TESTAMENTS BETRAYED: AN ESSAY IN NINE PARTS. *By Milan Kundera. Translated from the French by Linda Asher. HarperCollins. $24.*

Reviewed by SUSAN MIRON

*Testaments Betrayed* will doubtless remind many of Kundera's provocative *Art of the Novel* (1988), but careful readers will note how the posthumous betrayal of artists' intentions and wishes—the predominant theme of *Testaments Betrayed*—was illustrated with great panache in Kundera's novel *Immortality* in an enchanting posthumous encounter between Ernest Hemingway and Goethe. Hemingway recalls having begged "everyone a thousand times to leave my life alone," but to no avail. "Haven't you realized, Ernest," Goethe chides him, "that the figures they talk about have nothing to do with us?"

Often vilified in his homeland for his immense popularity and for living the "good

SUSAN MIRON's essays have appeared in the *Partisan Review, Salmagundi, Agni,* and the *Forward.*



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life" abroad, Kundera has indeed enjoyed a far wider readership abroad than in his own country. The Czech writer Ivan Klíma explains (in *The Spirit of Prague*), "The allergy to him is not produced by the quality of his writing" but because the experience he presents is at odds with the fact "that he himself had been an indulged and rewarded child of the communist regime until 1968," when he left Czechoslovakia for France. Kundera launches a counterattack here, ridiculing those who, shortly after the end of Communism, repeatedly referred to "the forty lost (or horrible) years," thus betraying their own memories and historical accuracy itself. Have they, he asks, "forgotten the years when they were seeing Milos Forman's films, reading Bohumil Hrabal's books, going to the little nonconformist theaters, and telling hundreds of jokes and cheerfully making fun of the regime? In their talk of forty horrible years, they were all *Orwellizing* the recollection of their own lives, which, a posteriori, in their memories and in their heads, were thereby devalued or even completely obliterated."

A musically knowledgeable writer, Kundera has stated that each section of his novels could carry a tempo indication (moderato, presto, adagio, etc.) that implies a shift in emotional atmosphere. In *Testaments Betrayed* (in nine parts, or movements, rather than his customary seven) Kundera's signature subject matter (the history, and life and death of the novel) and repertoire company of heroes (Hemingway, Kafka, Janácek, Stravinsky, Don Quixote) rematerialize, spinning out what appears to be madcap variations of the theme of misunderstandings, misperceptions, and misreadings.

Both Kundera and Klíma (who proudly sees himself as everything Kundera is not—a writer who toughed it out in Czechoslovakia, a Jew who spent part of his childhood in Terezin) have obsessively returned to Kafka in essays, novels, and plays. In *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera praises Kafka for breaking through the "plausibility barrier" in his novels, "not to escape the real world (as Romantics did) but to better apprehend it." The archvillain of *Testaments Betrayed* is, unsurprisingly, Kafka's friend and literary executor, Max Brod, who refused to burn Kafka's papers as requested. Because of this accursed creator of "Kafkology" whose "castrating shadow has blocked our view of one of the novel's greatest poets of all time," Kafka's work and life are now viewed by many "as a martyrdom to impotence." "Thus," Kundera scowls, "Kafka long ago became the patron saint of the neurotic, the depressive, the anorexic, the feeble." Following in Brod's misguided footsteps, "Kafkologists" have placed Kafka's books outside the history of the European novel, in the "*microcontext* of biography," where, regrettably, Kafka's biography dissolves into hagiography, thus dislodging Kafka from the domain of aesthetics and refusing to consider Kafka's kinship with Stravinsky, Webern, Bartók, Apollinaire, Musil, Joyce, Picasso, and Braque, all born between 1880 and 1883. "When people speak of him," Kundera shrugs, "they don't mention Hofmannsthal, or Mann, or Musil, or Broch: they leave him only one context: Felice, the father, Milena, Dora; he is flung back into the *mini-mini-mini-context* of his biography, far from the history of the novel, very far from art."

Kundera is struck by the parallel fates of Kafka and the great Czech composer Leos Janácek, both seen in their time as "provincial" Prague outsiders—"isolated souls"—who were, nevertheless, unquestionably the greatest artists of their country during their time. In his superb chapter, "The Unloved Child of the Family," Kundera posits that what handicaps small countries' artists, already "secluded behind their inaccessible languages," is everything and everyone who "hook the art onto the great national family portrait photo, pushing the artist back into the *small context* of the national."

As if the service he performed "with selfless ardor" for Kafka wasn't enough, the "aesthetically incompetent" Max Brod (a non-Czech) then attempted to put Janácek on the map *as a Czech* in his 1924 biography (which appeared the year of Kafka's death). Aware of musical Prague's hatred for this "composer from the provinces," Brod immures Janácek in a national tradition, alongside Smetana, ignoring his place in the large cosmopolitan context of European music, thereby sealing his isolation, provincialization, and aesthetic aloneness.

The patriotic Janácek, Kundera believes, paid an exorbitant price for not going into exile, despite the fact that official Czech musicology disdained him, and a Professor Nejedly, in his day "the pope of Prague musicology," who became the culture czar in



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Stalinized Czechoslovakia, "took with him into his bellicose senility only two great passions: Smetana worship and Janácek vilification." In an essay on Janácek published in *Crosscurrents* a decade ago, Kundera explained how Janácek's musical innovations "existed only for him"; no other composer followed through with them. "Consequently, his work has the air of a simple accident outside of History, of a beautiful garden off to one side of the main route." This lack of influence, always living in Smetana's shadow, left Janácek at the mercy of his adversaries, particularly orchestral conductors who imposed their own "improvements" (mutilations) on his scores, forcibly converting this "declared enemy of pathos into Puccini."

Translators of both Kafka and Kundera are chastised here, as well they might be. Kundera examines Kafka's sentence in the chapter of *The Castle* where K. and Frieda are making love, and he shows the differences between Kafka's original sentence and its reflections and distortions in the mirror of several French translations, which (except for an excellent translation done by Kundera) disregard the melodic importance of Kafka's repetition of certain words by deploying synonyms. Under the spell of what Kundera calls the *synonymizing reflex*, no translator was willing to grant that Kafka's "bareness of vocabulary expressed his *aesthetic intention*, that it was one of the distinctive marks of the *beauty* of his prose." As if this weren't enough, publishers have completely disregarded Kafka's wish that his books be printed in very large type, and editors have added a profusion of semicolons that "choke off Kafka's breath," and they have subdivided the "long, intoxicating flight" of his prose into tiny paragraphs.

Kundera savages "garbage can scavengers," those "devotees of the unessential" who forage for scraps an author or composer leaves behind, disregarding an artist's wish for a work to be destroyed, or at least not made public. He cites Proust's adage that the writer's true self is manifested in his books *alone*, a book being the product of a self other than the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices. As Hemingway complained to Goethe in *Immortality*:

As soon as immortality has you aboard, you can't get off, even if you shoot yourself you'll stay on


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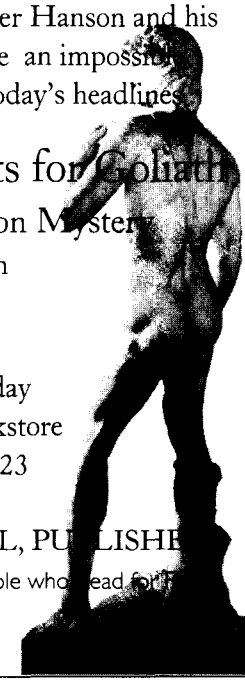


**Call for Papers**

The 1997 meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine will be held in Williamsburg, Virginia, April 3–6, 1997. Any person interested in presenting a paper at this meeting is invited to submit an abstract (one original and seven copies) by September 15, 1996, to:

Todd L. Savitt, Ph.D.
Department of Medical Humanities
East Carolina University School of Medicine
Greenville, North Carolina 27858-4354

Any subject in the history of medicine is suitable for presentation. Presentations are limited to twenty minutes.

Abstracts must be typed single-spaced on one sheet of paper and must not exceed 350 words in length.

The following information is required: Name, title (occupation), preferred mailing address, work and home telephone numbers, present institutional affiliation and academic degrees.



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board with your suicide, and that's horrible, Johann. . . . I was lying dead on the deck and I saw my four wives squatting around me, writing down everything they knew, and standing behind them was my son and he was scribbling too, and that old dame Gertrude Stein was there writing away and all my friends were blabbing out all the indiscretions and slanders they had ever heard about me, and behind them . . . an army of university professors all over America was busy classifying, analyzing, and shoveling everything into articles and books.

The "curtain rippers'" worst crime is their refusal to grant art its autonomous status by "forcing it back into its source," unaware that the private and public are two essentially different worlds and that this difference "is the indispensable condition, the sine qua non, for a man to live free." To illustrate his point, Kundera mocks the treatment of a passage of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" in Jeffrey Meyers's 1985 Hemingway biography where Meyers treats us to "a moral lesson," undoing the aesthetic nature of the original work, killing it off with what he thinks a kitsch-making interpretation. Meyers's reading, Kundera believes, is no different from those "improvements" and alterations conductors and arrangers imposed on Janácek's operas *Jenufa* and *The House of the Dead* with its spare, exotic sonorities. What these interpreters have done, he feels, arises from a force aimed "not at art alone but primarily at reality itself. . . . It throws a veil of commonplaces over the present moment, in order that the face of the real will disappear. So that you shall never know what you have lived."

Finally, Kundera sets out to demonstrate that "absolute veneration for everything their author touched" often implies totally disregarding the artist's wish for having stories, letters, or whatever else they want stricken from the record, deleted, burned. Deleting a paragraph, Kundera correctly insists, "calls for even more talent, cultivation, and creative power than writing it does. Therefore, publishing what the author deleted is the same act of rape as censoring what he decided to retain."

"A dead person," Kundera mourns, "is treated either as trash or as a symbol. Either way, it's the same disrespect to his vanished individuality." Since he's unable to regard as dead a person that he truly loves, Kundera concludes that the deceased's presence will be manifested in his (or her) wishes, "which I know and with which I will keep faith." One can only wish Milan Kundera better luck in his afterlife than the unfortunate writers who, if he is correct, must be spinning in their graves, realizing their wishes have been tampered with and betrayed precisely by those with the best of intentions.

## Kill the Messenger

BREAKING THE NEWS: HOW THE MEDIA UNDERMINE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY. *By James Fallows. Pantheon. $23.*

Reviewed by JAMES BOWMAN

In the week that James Fallows's new book was published, the following things happened. President Clinton gave a State of the Union address in which he ringingly proclaimed his belief in the Republican principle that "the era of Big Government is over." Mrs. Clinton appeared before a grand jury to explain why it was that her memory has suddenly gotten so bad. An anonymous novelist published a brilliant and thinly disguised roman à clef whose claim—that virtually nothing in the Clinton campaign of 1992 was what it seemed to be—no one in the administration thought to dispute. O. J. Simpson granted an interview to Black Entertainment Television on the condition that he be allowed to hawk his self-exculpatory video. Fallows's thesis, I discovered, was that "the media" is much to blame for encouraging its watchers and readers to treat the words and images it purveys with a great deal of skepticism, which he calls "cynicism."

Fallows's opening chapter is titled "Why We Hate the Media," and in it he provides some excellent reasons for hatred—most notably Mike Wallace's saying that if he had military information that could save American lives but that, if disclosed, would spoil a story, he would go with the story. Yet too often Fallows

✪ JAMES BOWMAN is the American editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, media critic of the *New Criterion*, and the film critic of the *American Spectator*.



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does not go far enough in adumbrating the real moral ugliness in such journalistic arrogance—the affectation by ink-stained (or blow-dried) wretches of Olympian detachment from merely human quarrels. His second chapter purports to show how that which we hate in the media—not only its arrogance but also its superficiality and meretriciousness—evolved out of a notionally superior past when journalists were able "to see life steady and see it whole" (quoted as the words of C. P. Scott, though Scott himself was quoting Matthew Arnold).

Much of this account of the economics of the news business is familiar; some of it is very likely relevant to an explanation of why we get the kind of news we get. But Fallows's materialist assumptions—his third chapter is called "The Gravy Train" and looks at the *enrichissement* of journalists at the top end of the profession through television and lecturing—themselves come to seem, finally, rather superficial. Although Mike Wallace makes a lot of money, it is not money that has made him so insufferable. Instead of emphasizing Wallace's hubris and seeing it reflected in every local newscaster's tendency to pontificate, Fallows builds up in chapters 4 and 5 and the concluding chapter 6 ("News and Democracy") an ideal of the news business so flattering to journalistic self-importance that Wallace himself would no doubt approve of it.

In all this discussion, it is not self-importance but its natural enemy, "cynicism," that is the principal villain for Fallows. The cynic, he believes, may even be said "to threaten the long-term health of our political system" itself:

> Step by step, mainstream journalism has fallen into the habit of portraying public life in America as a race to the bottom, in which one group of conniving, insincere politicians, ceaselessly tries to outmaneuver another. The great problem for American democracy in the 1990s is that people barely trust elected leaders or the entire legislative system to accomplish anything of value.

Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that the problem with American democracy in the 1990s is that the elected leaders so seldom show that they are worthy of people's trust? Fallows himself quotes a former aide to Bill Clinton as saying that, in his experience, "there is no such thing as a substantive discussion that is not shaped or dominated by how it is going to play in the press." In the light of this presumably inside look at policy making, would Fallows recommend that members of the press obligingly ignore the fact that the politicians are trying to spin them and consent to be spun? Clearly, "cynicism" in such an environment is a necessary survival technique.

But are the politicians cynical because the journalists are; or are the journalists cynical because the politicians are? Fallows thinks that it was the journalists, greedy for celebrity and money and TV time, who fired first, but the real answer is that neither journalists nor politicians are precisely cynical. Each group is simply playing to the expectations of the other—which is comfortable and symbiotic rather than cynical. Surely Fallows is right to raise the question of "Why we hate the media," but the answer is not because they are too cynical about politicians. They are, instead, too cozy with them. As politicians have become more and more inclined to take journalists at their

**Conference on Democracy and Trust**

**Georgetown University**

Georgetown University is hosting a Conference on Democracy and Trust on November 7–9, 1996. The conference is intended to address the relationships between democratic and democratizing societies in the 21st century. Papers will represent a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Participants include Jean Cohen (Political Science, Columbia), Russell Hardin (Politics, New York University), Rom Harré (Psychology, Georgetown and Oxford), Ronald Inglehart (Political Science, University of Michigan), Claus Offe (Humboldt Universität Berlin, Germany), Orlando Patterson (Sociology, Harvard), Robert Putnam (Government, Harvard), Ric Uslaner (Government and Politics, University of Maryland), James Scott (Agrarian Studies and Political Science, Yale), Carmen Sirianni (Sociology, Brandeis), John Shotter (Communications, University of New Hampshire), and Charles Taylor (Philosophy, McGill).

For further information, please contact Mark Warren, Department of Government, 660 ICC or Gerald Mara, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 302 ICC, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.



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own valuation as doers of good and righters of wrongs, their sense of their own importance has been inflated to the grotesque proportions suggested by Mr. Wallace. Isn't that enough reason to hate them?

Not for Fallows. On the contrary, he shares their belief in the journalistic calling as politics by other means. What he objects to is their forgetting their responsibilities to change the world in the meretricious pursuit of "horse race" stories about politicians to titillate (as they suppose) a jaded public. "The subtle but steady result is a stream of daily messages that the real meaning of public life is the struggle of Bob Dole against Newt Gingrich against Bill Clinton, rather than our collective efforts to solve collective problems," he writes. "The habit of emphasizing partisan consequences is so ingrained that it's hard to realize that it's not a law of nature." But who—besides J. Fallows—says that it's *not* a law of nature? Certainly, partisanship has been a feature of every democratic polity known to man. If that's not a law of nature, it's near enough to one that it makes no difference.

Fallows blames it all on the media, who treat "health reform, budget-cutting, trade negotiations, and the other challenges of the modern presidency as if they were fundamentally boring." But, alas, they *are* fundamentally boring! Especially when we know that the terms of the debate are invariably irrelevant, for reasons of the political horse race, to what is actually enacted. Yet to report the horse race is for Fallows to acknowledge that "everything is a sham. Conflicts are built up and then they blow over, and no one is sincere. As onlookers we can laugh at and look down at the participants, because everyone knows it's all done for effect." The thought that maybe, in just this one case, what everyone knows might happen to be true, is apparently too horrible for Fallows even to contemplate. He appears to assume for the sake of his own mental or spiritual tranquility that the sham is all in the journalists' heads.

That need is also implied in Fallows's rather feeble attempts to construct an epistemology of "the news." In his fourth chapter he asks not what news is but "Why do we need the news?" His first answer, that we need it to put events into perspective, is not very satisfactory. By definition the news is extremely perishable produce, and perspective can only come with time. Besides, he gives no consideration whatever to the question of how you find this perspective or even, in detail, what it is. He simply assumes that the news is whatever he thinks it is. He assumes, for instance, that military spending and the trade deficit with Japan are among the issues, neglected by the press, "that really threatened the country." But what of the millions of people who don't think that either of these things have threatened the future of the country? They disagree with Fallows, ergo they have no "perspective."

It soon becomes clear what Fallows thinks the real purpose of the news is. It is to be "useful." Standard TV news policy that "if it bleeds, it leads" means, he says, that "the news becomes fundamentally useless, in that it teaches us all to despair." If this is so, then utility is presumably a higher value to the journalist than truth or accuracy or objectivity. And not only must the news be useful to us, by keeping us from despair, it must also be useful, Marxist fashion, to politicians who want to make a better world. Fallows cites against the media "increasing evidence that their cynical handling of political issues and their contextless presentation of violent events make society's problems harder to solve than they would otherwise be." His advocacy of "public journalism," together with a long and tedious discussion of the Clinton health care bill of 1993–94 (the reporting of which he sees as a monument to media bungling) is presumably his own contribution to solving society's problems.

But the real interest of *Breaking the News* is not in its advocacy of politically subservient journalists—an issue in any case as dead as the Clinton health care bill. Instead, it is, as it is in so much journalism, in the author's emotional edge. This is imparted by outrage at the spectacle of journalists as "performers" or "entertainers" who "will put on a show for a price." Why, we might ask with Dr. Johnson, should the commonality be denied such poor sweeteners of their existence? The answer is that Fallows and his like will not be exalted enough personages in any social arrangement where they are obliged to catch and hold the interest of people. The bigfeet and the buckrakers, he says, "jeopardize the credibility of everything that journalists do," so that "journalists and the act of journalism are cheapened."

There, swirling down the plumbing, goes



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the author's own sacred calling. And with it goes the ticket that journalism provides to those of otherwise modest intellectual attainments for admission to the status of gurus and philosophers and wise men. Fallows's ambition is to advise presidents and princes and potentates who, he supposes, can design social and political systems more pleasing than those nature has provided. Being a cynic about such systems myself, I welcome the fact that Americans seem to be wising up to the unloveliness of the spectacle of journalistic self-righteousness and self-importance. People are not wise just because they tell us they are. As journalists look more and more like greedy buffoons in the public eye, we should take it as a healthy sign. The more people hate them, the less likely it is that the hacks of the future will want to join their ranks.

## Out of This World

PETRUSHKA AND THE DANCER: THE DIARIES OF JOHN COWPER POWYS, 1929–1939. *Selected and edited by Morine Krissdóttir. St. Martin's Press. $39.95.*

Reviewed by HAROLD FROMM

Although his name falls well short of being a household word, John Cowper Powys has a cult of admirers whose devotion is no less intense than that of the Bloomsberries. Unlike them, the Powysians are involved with what is strictly a family affair—John Cowper, Llewelyn, and Theodore being the most distinguished of a variously talented clan. To celebrate them, there is a North American Powys Society as well as an English one, the chairman of which, Morine Krissdóttir, has assembled—one is tempted to say "created"—*Petrushka and the Dancer,* a selection from the diaries of John Cowper Powys.

I say "created" because a readable volume has been distilled from a large mass of diaries of which the handwriting and its deployment alone are daunting. (An autograph page is given as a sample on the endpapers.) But the manuscripts present more problems than mere handwriting, which Dr. Krissdóttir has artfully negotiated, even though her English publisher made matters more difficult by forbidding the use of footnotes. Instead, what we have here are brief introductions to each of the ten years covered by these particular diaries, even briefer bridges or headnotes to prepare the reader for obscure references, and plenty of ellipsis marks to indicate the extensive omissions necessitated by a concern for the reader's patience.

Powys, after all, is one of those strange writers whose reputation brooks no middle ground: he's either a genius or a charlatan and there's an end on 't. (I take these terms of evaluation from critical writings about him.) Known principally for sprawling novels (among them *Wolf Solent, A Glastonbury Romance*) that are Victorian in form but certainly not in mentality, Powys also wrote philosophical works, advice books, and critical essays, and he spent many years on the lecture circuit in the United States during the twenties and thirties. Highly sexed, rough-hewn, and driven by a chthonic imagination, he seems like an amalgam of Ford Madox Ford, Robert Graves, Dylan Thomas, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence (among others), strikingly "masculine" despite his flirtations with androgyny and polymorphous perversity—and with a life almost as disordered as all theirs combined.

Powys's "genius" I take to be connected with his larger-than-life bardic universe of myth, psychology, imposingly varied knowledge, and "nature-worship." His "charlatanry" is probably connected with these very same characteristics, experienced as what we would now call New Age bombast or mystical moonshine. The issue seems unresolvable, a clear-cut matter of readerly taste and sensibility.

The diaries present Powys's life in upper New York State, England, and Wales with his companion, Phyllis Playter, with whom he lived for the second half of his life in separation from his wife and son. When they met, Phyllis Playter was an urban sylph about half his age, and he was a literary satyr despite his upper-middle-class English upbringing and intense mental life. The selection offered here reveals a Powys so thoroughly saturated with the affective life of the body, so totally, as it were, *embodied,* that it is his New Age mystical side that comes across more than anything else. Perhaps (as with Edmund Wilson's and

✪ HAROLD FROMM has written for the *Hudson Review,* the *Virginia Quarterly Review,* and the *Georgia Review.*



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those of so many others) this is what a certain kind of artist's diary is for—to express the hidden life of the body before it becomes variously transmuted into more acceptable public artifacts. Yet when one turns, after the diaries, to a performance such as Powys's little book on Dorothy Richardson (which admittedly he allowed her to edit before publication), one is startled by the intellectual and emotional control of its powerful and brilliant critical rhetoric, its hyperboles notwithstanding.

On the face of things, Powys and Phyllis Playter seem the least compatible of housemates, and one marvels at how well they endured each other's unstintingly maddening qualities. Phyllis, whom he called the T.T. or Tiny Thin, was a highly strung, fastidious, delicate, and possibly suicidal woman who hated housework, visitors, and general domesticity. At times she wanted only to die, but it may very well be the case that Powys's adoration kept her alive, however taxing it must have been to receive it. She seems, among other things, to have tolerated his obsessive lovemaking quite well. Despite a tropism toward other creatures and an attempt to identify himself with the natural world, with both its beauty and rawness, Powys was strongly titillated by guilt and he enjoyed the edge it gave to his lecherousness, referring to sexual intercourse as lust-making rather than love-making.

The very contrast between Powys's own physical roughness and Phyllis's delicacy drove him to ecstacies, as he reflected on the "Little Ballad Girl who Satisfies all my abnormal Wickedness" and on his own "Saurian Lust like an Ichthyosaurus who had stolen a little girl." Further sample: "And as I held her I was aware of a fragrance from her inmost essence the smell of some unknown magic plant! A little like hay—perhaps like Meadow-Sweet. It was *not* perspiration. Heaven knows what it was. The very fragrance of the little T.T.'s Soul." Moreover, Phyllis could feed his tendency toward mythic representation of himself and the world: "I hold her & hold the earth too when I walk even as *Antaeus* renewed his Strength! Death alone will be the Hercules who will hold me at last *from off the earth* in his arms & in that way strangle me." An obsession with sadism, provocative magazine ads, and dirty books added further piquancy to this strange love affair.

They lived close to poverty, highly dependent on Powys's lectures and on his prolific output of writing, sometimes at the verge of genuine destitution. Despite this, Phyllis tried on occasion to satisfy her taste for beauty by acquiring handsome carpets and home furnishings whenever they could manage to spare the cash, but these acquisitions only added to their grounds for conflict and Phyllis's rage over Powys's clumsy destructiveness. The diary selections, oddly, reveal no obvious signs of anger on his part, only remorse. Time after time he played the role of bull in the china shop, accidentally burning up with the trash a precious royalty check for $225, regularly lamenting his own insensitivity and clumsiness as he spilled food on the new carpet or traipsed into the house with muddy boots, scorched his gloves in the hot coals, tore his trousers, served Phyllis tea in bed but not without overturning her cup on the bedclothes, failed to stop the house pets from doing (as he puts it) "number 1" or "number 2" on the bed or rugs.

The omnipresence of the excremental is one of the most striking aspects of the diaries, with Powys requiring enemas every third day to alleviate a chronic bowel problem that nowadays would be handled very differently. Phyllis herself usually administered these sacred rites, which punctuated Powys's week like canonical hours and filled him with anxiety over a period of many years, lest he should find himself without an assistant. He watched with a voyeur's interest as his beloved dog, "the Old," urinated and defecated along the route of their walks, and after the dog's death (one of the most traumatic of Powys's experiences, which he relived over and over), he would visit the dog's grave and in a very real sense "make love" to him while overseeing in imagination the various canine gestures involved in the processes of bodily elimination. But as excremental and destructive as he may have been, he writes, "I am not destructive to beautiful limbs when they are lying by my side!"

Like Blake, Powys lived too much in the cosmos to be able to attend to the details of practical life. "I worked steadily and hard if you can call it hard when it's only too easy a *vicious self-indulgence* to me really, my writing, compared with hanging up my trowsers, or stamping my letters, or counting *words* in an article,



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or dealing with Income Tax." He would have found very congenial today's interest in Native American writing, with its animistic spirit and its sympathy with the physical and organic world. But in the final analysis it is hard to know what to make of Powys's ritualistic embraces of nature. He prayed to a statue of the Earth Mother when he visited the British Museum, he "kissed the soul" of a tree, he talked to the spirit of a swamp, he obeyed "the wishes of every organism" he was with, he dipped his fingers into water held by a stone "& crossed myself and also put a drop into my mouth," he regularly spent time in compulsive prayers and invocations to natural phenomena (although he was unsympathetic to conventional Christianity). "The T.T. thinks and indeed I think myself that the time has come to curtail these rigamarole Invocations of mine which have grown to be a burden far too heavy and allowing me not a moment's chance to contemplate. . . . I am ceasing to be a disciple of Wordsworth and becoming a Monk of the Thebaid!" But they didn't really stop.

Even with the fetishistic quality of Powys's mentality and Phyllis's character as "*a grande nerveuse*," the compatibility of their incompatability, more than noteworthy, was essential to their very lives. The T.T.'s insight into his writings amazed him each time afresh. He seemed perpetually stunned by her dual persona as fragile nymphet and powerful intellect, observing that "in critical penetration her brain is superior to mine." She suggested radical revisions for much of what he wrote and complained that he ruined his novels with propaganda. But when it came to cutting or editing, Powys seemed to have surprisingly little ego investment. He submitted immensely long novels to his publishers, who insisted on drastic reductions, sometimes sexual expurgations, to which he rarely objected. "I don't mind such expurgations one bit. I am proud of my cleverness in making 'em. I have nothing in me of that new Puritanism which has so austere a Conscience over the '39 Articles' of stern aesthetic probity. I am an unscrupulous Time-Server over Art because I am a writer of a kind that is not aesthetic so much as—what dare I say?—Prophetic or Inspired sounds too presumptuous!" And: "As to cutting my book my point of view is *not* that of an artist *at all.* I write for delight & cut for Ducats."

Still, Powys found editing a much harder chore than writing and expressed deep gratitude for Phyllis's assistance. "She ought to be living the life of an *Abnormal* woman, not a normal woman—with some sort of Intellectual Work[,] & everything practical done for her by *normal* women. She has the imagination of a poet-critic, of an artist, of a generalizer in Nuances—& what can be done to make her fate—as a normal house-keeping woman—endurable?" But to all appearances, neither one of them was really suited to the exigencies of this world, however much Powys gloried in the sheer fact of existence—albeit an existence filtered through layers of myth unavailable to Phyllis.

As much as the diary reveals of Powys's "antic eccentricity" (to borrow his editor's phrase), these entries were intended as a public document from the start. They are frequently addressed in the vocative to a putative future reader. What that reader will make of so curious a vision is anybody's guess. But our own anti-rational post-modernism might prove just the right amniotic environment for hatching new admirers.


## Call for Papers

*Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* invites submissions for its 20th anniversary issues, to appear in 1997. Editors are especially interested in essays that extend the range of biography, autobiography, hagiography, oral and group history into other fields and disciplines.

Editors would also like to see articles on lifewriting outside the Anglo-American literary corridor—Pacific, African, Central and Eastern European, Central and South American subjects.

Manuscripts should be between 2,500 and 7,500 words. Please submit two copies without the author's name on either. Decisions about publication will be received within three months, and comments are provided for all essays received.

Send submissions to the Center for Biographical Research, c/o Department of English, 1733 Donaghho Road, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822.

For more information, contact the Editor, Craig Howes, at biograph@hawaii.edu, at 808-956-3774, or at the above address.




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# The Reader Replies

## The Last Man of Letters

While I thoroughly enjoyed William Pritchard's refreshing tribute to Julian Symons in the Winter 1996 issue, I was surprised to find him saying in it that Geoffrey Grigson did not attend a university.

Grigson was an Oxford man and it was Oxford that shaped the taste, the passions and the prejudices, that made *New Verse* what it was: Grigson's objection to "lit. crit." was based, in part, on his notion that it was a Cambridge invention; his epic antipathy to Edith Sitwell began when he was subjected to the spectacle of her chanting her verses on an Oxford platform; and his affection for and loyalty to the poems of Norman Cameron, perhaps the most important single influence on Roy Fuller, Ruthven Todd, Kenneth Allott, and other poets identified with Symons's *Twentieth Century Verse*, began when Grigson first came across Cameron's poems in the annual anthologies of *Oxford Poetry* dating from 1925 to 1928.

Grigson was certainly the antithesis of an academic critic, but he did attend a university, having entered St. Edmund's Hall in 1924.

WARREN HOPE
Havertown, Pennsylvania

**WILLIAM PRITCHARD replies:** Warren Hope is completely right in his correction of my claim that Geoffrey Grigson never attended university. In my eagerness to bracket him with Julian Symons and V. S. Pritchett as non-university critics, I got the facts wrong. Apologies.

## Making Movies

*Thus* is the key word in a sentence in "What Do Movie Producers Do?" the personal essay by Barbara Maltby in your Winter issue. "With expenses so high and profits so tenuous, one can understand why Hollywood is so averse to taking risks *and why it usually goes for the lowest common denominator and thus the largest audience appeal.*"

*Thus.* Words are not symbols of things. They are symbols of meaning. *Thus* the *lowest common denominator* means *the largest audience appeal.*

In The Beginning Was The Word—and at the end of a world, too.

Democracy had, perhaps, confidently overestimated the character of the intelligence of the people—meaning that the largest audience appeal is *not* necessarily bad. But illusions of confidence are still preferable to calculations of cynicism. Democracy has now led, cynically, to the *underestimation* of the character of the people. Its evidences are all around us—not only in Hollywood productions but in education, publishing, the politics of entertainment, and the entertainment of politics. These calculations have a way of becoming self-fulfilling—for their managers, that is. Yes, it is easier to deal with people this way. It also leads to catastrophes whose consequences are incalculable. Catastrophes: no, not of "culture," but of civilization itself.

Except for the providential unpredictability of history. There are still very many people to whom the lowest common denominator does *not* appeal, but we must not count on that while the managers of Market Research are still at it.

This is not a diatribe. It is a cry of despair. And—perhaps—of hope.

JOHN LUKACS
Phoenixville, Pennsylvania

## "Is God Really Dead in Beverly Hills?"

In sampling the decline of religious subjects and the concomitant rise of supernatural and space subjects in the movies over the last fifty years, Stanley Rothman ("Is God Really Dead in Beverly Hills?" Spring 1996) has offered intriguing insight but chosen not to comment on some related issues that might well have been included.

Religious epics of the 1950s and 1960s were made, in part, because "The production Code and the Hollywood mogul's conservative control over the industry mandated this kind of representation. . . ." and because " . . . these movies were also harmonious with American religious sensibilities. . . ." They were also made because of



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a new technology. Cinemascope, Technicolor and improved sound systems were the frameworks for a canvas demanding bold, large-scale story-telling. Biblical, musical, western and later, war epics, were the appropriate story sources for the new technology. There is even an historic aspect: the opportunity for a producer or director to tell a famous story on a scale not previously possible.

At which point was it no longer true that " . . . these movies were also harmonious with American religious sensibilities . . . "? Mr. Rothman gives no recognition to a fundamental shift in America's mood in the last fifty years. In the 1950s, America was the force of good that had recently triumphed over Germany and Japan, saved Europe from Stalin and had also triumphed, internally, over the Depression. The subsequent generation matured in a world where good no longer prevailed over evil but where the tables were turned: an ex-president who resigned in disgrace is buried with heroes' honors, murderers walk freely among us and corporations guilty of large-scale destruction to the world's resources continue their activities unpunished and unrestrained. It is not so much a matter of not "needing" the "myth of the inevitable triumph of good over evil" as a matter of not believing it any longer. Coincidentally, Mr. Rothman incorrectly attempts to illuminate this issue using the alien creature from the movie *Alien.* The creature in the film is not one of the "powerful evil forces that cannot be finally vanquished" but a life form driven by the imperative for survival, attacking only when cornered. Mr. Rothman will see, should he view the movie again, that the evil force is the Nostromo's corporate owner which clandestinely orders the return of the alien at the expense of the crew.

Mr. Rothman has successfully identified a trend in contemporary science fiction movies of redemption from above, citing *2001* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as two excellent illustrations. He might have said something about the Richard Dreyfuss character's obsession to be on the mountaintop and he might also have said something about *2010,* where we learn from Keir Dullea that "something wonderful is going to happen" and where mankind is given permission by, presumably, its Creator, to explore all worlds, except one. The new supernatural and space subjects have supplanted the religious subjects. Do they satisfy the same spiritual yearning?

STEVEN HOLTZ
Miami, Florida

In "Is God Really Dead in Beverly Hills?" Stanley Rothman interprets *Alien* as a film that deals with "powerful evil forces that cannot finally be vanquished." He later asserts that the lack of a substitute for religion in Hollywood "is reflected in a plethora of films that document the triumph of evil, an evil which, as in *Alien,* often emerges from the bowels of the victim." I see this movie differently and do not believe that it should be grouped with conventional "triumph-of-evil" pictures.

To me, *Alien* is not so much about powerful evil as it is about an insensate universe, a Godless universe in which Darwinian principles of evolution prove to be impossible to overcome. The world of *Alien* is designed by Richard Dawkins's blind watchmaker, and its characters suffer the disastrous results of humanity's desire to control a nature that will not be controlled. (The human desire for control emerges from the fact that the crew of the *Nostromo* is diverted to the alien by their own greedy corporation.) Humanity, so accustomed to being the hunter, becomes the prey. Despite the crew's attempts to kill the vicious predator unleashed aboard their ship, only Sigourney Weaver's character, Ripley, barely escapes. Her survival is as much due to luck as it is to skill or moral heroism.

What Ripley survives is not a force of evil but a force of nature. The battle is not between good and evil but between one selfish gene and another. God finds no place in the universe of *Alien,* yet I did not get the impression that the film's creators were seeking a replacement for religion or acknowledging the triumph of evil over good. If anything, *Alien* expresses the fear that the world is neither good nor evil but coldly indifferent. Or, as the film's trailer puts it: "In space, no one can hear you scream."

LEROY GONZALEZ
New York, New York

**STANLEY ROTHMAN replies:** It is true, as Steven Holtz notes, that I do not in "Is God Really Dead . . . ?" discuss the changes that have taken place in American life since the early 1960s. To read my views on that question and the relation of these changes to motion pictures, I suggest he purchase *Hollywood's America,* the book from which the essay is derived and which was published in June 1996. In my view Mr. Holtz's analysis of the reasons for the decline of the culture and its relation to films is simplistic.

Though it is true that Technicolor and CinemaScope encouraged studio heads to attempt to compete with television by lavish productions, religious epics long antedate the new Hollywood technology. De Mille and others were filming them during the 1920s and 1930s. They include such movies as *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), *The Crusades* (1935), and earlier versions of *Ten Commandments* (1923), and *Ben Hur* (1925).



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I also challenge Mr. Holtz on the film *Alien*. It is true that the "corporation" is guilty of exposing humans to the alien. It is also true, however, that, whatever the motivations of the alien, it is treated as an elemental evil force in the film much like the shark in *Jaws*. At least that is the way our coders saw it, and, I suspect, most of the viewing public, despite the fact that, in an ultimate sense, the term *evil* may not apply. I suspect the producers and writers saw it that way too.

*Alien* is clearly a powerful film. Both letters responding to my essay in THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR discuss it.

Mr. Gonzalez has misread my article. We do not code the alien as having supernatural powers, though given his ability to overwhelm the human technology, it is a close call. I do say that science fiction films can be concerned with the problem of evil but they can do this using a quasi-religious, magical or even a completely naturalistic approach.

We do not, *pace* Mr. Gonzalez, argue that the battle between the humans and the alien is a battle of good versus evil. We do code the alien as *evil* rather than neutral or mixed and Mr. Gonzalez would seem to agree. After all it is he who describes the alien as a "vicious predator." The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *vicious* as "Having the nature of vice; evil, immoral or depraved." Ripley is not described as vicious by Mr. Gonzalez.

Quod Erat Demonstrandum!

## *Inevitable Illusions*

Jim Holt's review of *Inevitable Illusions* in the Spring 1996 SCHOLAR may have caused many of you to doubt your own reason when he tried to explain how the positive predictive value of a test varies with the incidence of disease in a population. I wrestle with this concept annually when I introduce young physicians to the fundamentals of medical research. The error occurred when Holt stated as his initial premise "the test is 99% reliable; to wit, only one in a hundred of those who test positive do not actually have the disease." This statement is in fact the positive predictive value, and it means exactly what most of you correctly thought, which is that the chance of a positive test being correct is 99%. You were understandably confused when Holt then went on to calculate that the chance of the test being correct was only 17%, when he had just told you that chance was 99%. He should have stated as his initial premise that the *specificity* (the proper term, not "reliability") of the test was 99%, and explained that as "only one in a hundred of those *without* the disease will test positive." This would have made his subsequent analysis and calculation quite correct.

As far as the "Monty Hall dilemma" goes, Mr. Holt's mind is the one that has been foiled. There are only three ways that two goats can be distributed among three doors: goats can be behind doors 1&2, 1&3, or 2&3. These three are equally likely since we are assuming a random distribution. The demonstration of a goat behind door 2 rules out *one* of these three equal possibilities (goat at 1&3). Two possibilities remain, (goat at 1&2 or 2&3). These two configurations remain equally likely and therefore there is a 50% chance of either being the case, not 33% vs. 67%. Holt's error is in failing to recalculate the odds after eliminating one of the possibilities ("the likelihood that the car is behind door A *remains* one in three"). It does not so remain, as there are only two equally possible configurations left. If you doubt that the odds must be reassessed after excluding some of the possibilities, consider: I am holding a card in my hand, is it a club, diamond, heart, or spade? The odds of each are 1 in 4. Suppose I "slyly reveal" that the card is not a club, diamond, or heart. Do the odds remain 1 in 4 that it's a spade?

Are these confusions in Piatelli-Palmarini's original book, Botsford's "wonky" translation, or Holt's interpretation?

ROBERT S. PORTER
Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania

**JIM HOLT replies:** Mr. Porter is right on the first point. In simplifying the clinical test example, I made a blunder that he and a number of other readers jumped on with varying degrees of severity. To deny a tautology is an embarrassing thing to do in a review about rationality.

He is wrong on the second point. To see why, he might try actually grinding out the probabilities using Bayes' formula. Or he might take a look at "Behind Monty Hall's Doors: Puzzle, Debate, and Answer?" (*New York Times*, July 21, 1991, p. 1) or L. Gillman's "The Car and the Goats" (*American Mathematical Monthly*, January 1992). But maybe this variant of the Monty Hall dilemma will help. Suppose there are 10 doors, not 3—1 with a car behind it, 9 with goats. You pick, say, door number 4. Then Monty shows you that there goats behind doors 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10. That leaves door 7, and your original choice, door 4. I don't know about Mr. Porter, but I'd want to switch to door 7.



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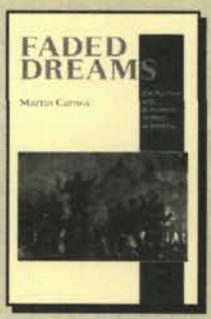


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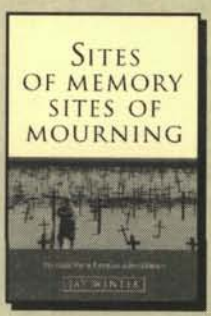


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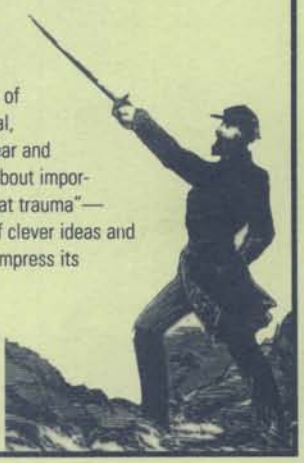

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